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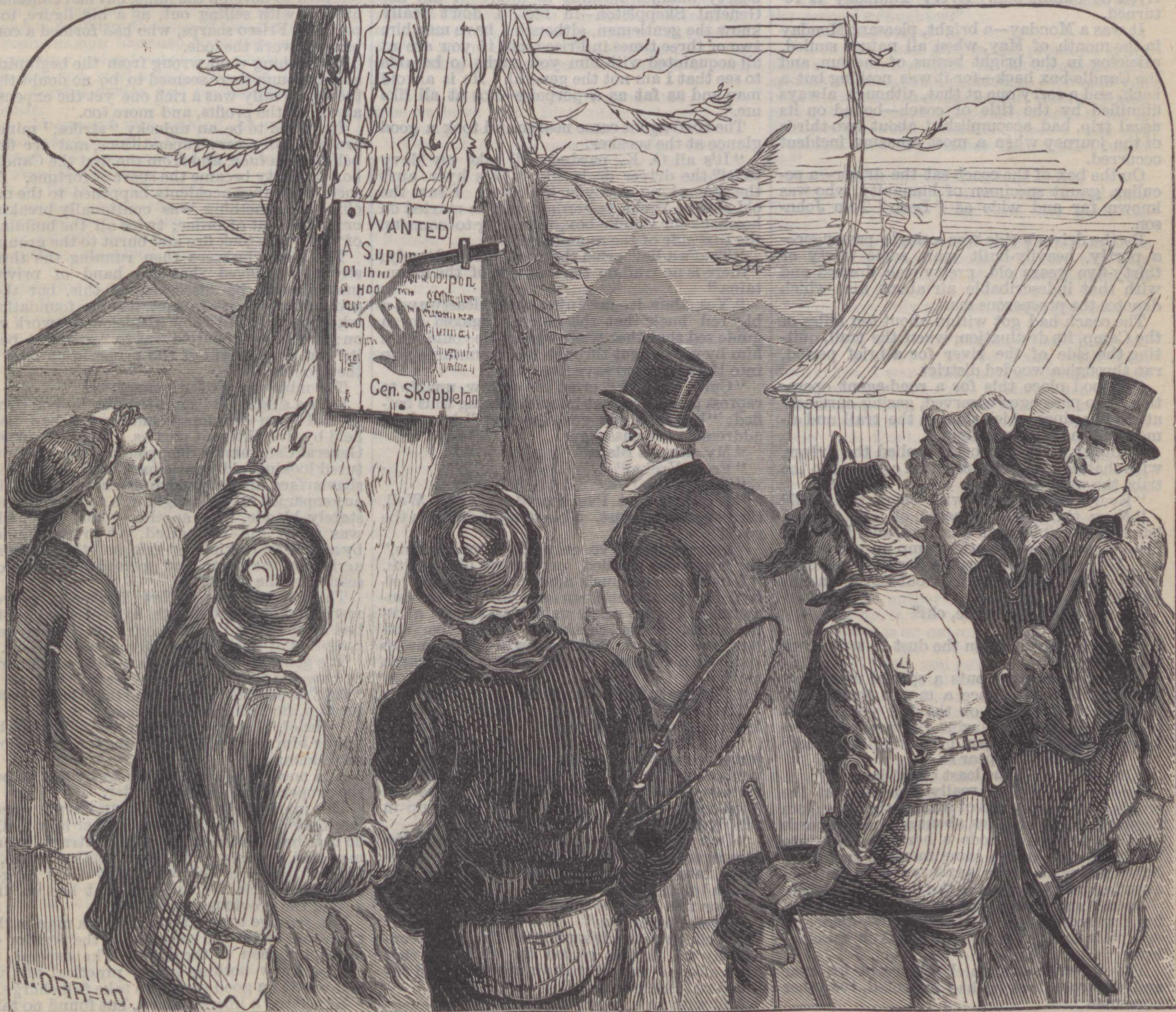
No. 107

RICHARD TALBOT OF CINNABAR: or, The Brothers of the Red Hand.

A strange tale of a lonely Californian camp and the rude mortals who dwelt therein.

BY ALBERT W. AIKEN,

AUTHOR OF "THE MAN FROM NEW YORK," "THE SPOTTER DETECTIVE," "THE NEW YORK SHARP," "OVERLAND KIT," "INJUN DICK," ETC.



THROUGH THE GENERAL'S PLACARD A STRONG ARM HAD DRIVEN AN EIGHT-INCH BOWIE-KNIFE, AND RIGHT UNDERNEATH THE KNIFE WAS THE PLAIN IMPRINT OF A RED HAND.

Richard Talbot of Cinnabar;

OR,

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CHAPTER I.

THE ROAD-AGENT WITH THE STRANGE DEVICE.

PARALLEL with the line of the coast, although many miles distant, on our Pacific runs a chain of mountains—the lower portion of which is known as the Coast Range, and the upper as the Cascade Mountains.

The Klamath river, flowing westward from the lakes in which it rises, on its way to the great Pacific ocean into which it falls, cuts the range in two; hence the double appellation.

The great highway from California to Oregon breaks through the mountain chain at Yreka, keeps pretty well within the shadows of the big hills until the Klamath river is crossed, then bends off a little to the westward to Jacksonville and the upper towns.

Just at the Klamath crossing a small trail left the main road and went directly to the eastward along the northern bank of the river.

A single place only was served by this trail, a new mining-camp, situated just about twenty miles from where the main road crossed the river.

Candle box Camp the place was called; and its only means of communication with the outer world, represented by the town of Yreka, was a small, weather-beaten coach which made a single trip each way once a week.

Bright and early every Monday morning the coach left Yreka, and as it took some ten hours to make the journey, just at supper-time it arrived at Candle-box. Every Thursday it returned.

It was a Monday—a bright, pleasant Monday in the month of May, when all nature smiled, rejoicing in the bright beams of the sun, and the Candle-box hack—for it was nothing but a hack, and a sorry one at that, although always dignified by the title of coach—bound on its usual trip, had accomplished about two-thirds of the journey when a most amazing incident occurred.

On the box of the coach sat the driver—a peculiar, gaunt specimen of humanity, who was known far and wide as "Lean" Tom Johnson.

By the driver's side was a single passenger—a portly, heavily-built man, some thirty or thirty-five years old, pretty well dressed and with that indescribable air about him which denotes the prosperous man.

The coach had got within about ten miles of the Camp, its destination, when the trail, quitting the side of the river for a brief period, ran through a wooded district.

"A good place this for a road-agent operation," the passenger observed, gazing curiously at the big pines which shut in the trail and almost hid the sky from sight.

"Mighty good, you bet!" replied the driver, with that dogged determination common to the tribe the world over.

"Ever troubled much with 'em on this trail?"

"Nary time!—never heerd of one since I handled the ribbons on this road, and I've been drivin' on it ever since the Camp up yere started. Up on the upper road, sometimes the boys come down on the coaches, but never on this yere trail."

"Not worth the trouble, eh?"

"That's so!"

"But how about when the dust is sent down by express?"

"Oh, the company puts a special messenger on—Big Bill Smith; once a month that is, and he sits alongside of me on the box yere, armed to the teeth; two magazine rifles and four revolvers; he could whip a dozen, single-handed."

"Yes, it would appear so."

"But, thar ain't the least bit of danger."

And so the driver really thought, but the words were hardly out of his mouth when from behind a clump of pines, about a hundred yards ahead of the coach, rode a horseman out into the trail, and at the same moment two more horsemen made their appearance in the road about a hundred yards in the rear of the coach.

Lean Tom pulled up his horses without waiting for orders; for, at the very first glance, it was plain that the rider ahead was on mischief bent.

The driver cast a quick glance in his rear and discovered, as he had expected, the other horsemen.

Strangely attired indeed were these unknown riders who had so unceremoniously made their appearance.

They were all in blue—blue overalls, pants and jacket, and a blue hood pulled over their heads, so as to completely disguise their faces; naught but their eyes could be seen.

The man in front of the coach was distinguished from the other two by a strange device which he wore upon his breast—a device which as plainly signified who and what he was as the wit of man could have devised.

It was a blood-red hand!

All three of the road-agents—for there was no doubt that these oddly-dressed riders were followers of that patron saint of thieves, winged Mercury, and that their garb was designed solely to prevent them from being recognized—were splendidly armed. They carried repeating rifles in their hands and heavy revolvers were slung in holsters at their waists.

Although considerably astonished, neither the driver nor the passenger seemed to be much alarmed.

True, Lean Tom had nothing to lose, and perhaps the passenger was no better "fixed."

"Do you know this fellow?" the traveler asked, cool as could be, as the road-agent rode slowly toward the coach.

"Nary time," the driver responded, laconically.

The rider advanced until he was within fifty feet of the coach; then he halted and raised the cocked rifle menacingly toward his shoulder.

"Throw up your hands!"

It was the old cry so familiar to Californian ears.

"Up they air!" responded the driver, immediately; "though what in thunder you expect to git is more than I kin make out."

"That's my business!" cried the road-agent, sharply. "Keep your mouth shut or you'll catch cold! You, sir, are my mutton," he continued, addressing the passenger. "I'll trouble you, General Cadwalader Skeppleton, to get down out of that seat," and the man accompanied the command with a very ominous motion of the cocked rifle.

The passenger stared, not alarmed but amazed.

"I beg your pardon, sir, but you are laboring under a mistake," he said, in the bluff and hearty manner natural to him. "I am not General Skeppleton—in fact, I don't really know the gentleman, although I have met him two or three times in Frisco, but if you are at all acquainted with him you ought to be able to see that I am not the general. He is an old man and as fat as a porpoise—not at all like me."

The road-agent came nearer and took a good glance at the speaker.

"It's all O. K., pardner, I'll take my 'davy to it!" the driver declared. "This hyer ain't the general, no way you kin fix it. I saw the old cuss in Yreka yesterday, and he started on hossback for Candle-box, intending to come up the east side of the mountains."

"That's a lie!" cried the road-agent, fiercely; "there is no trail on the east side of the mountains."

"Yes, thar is—an Injun trail; leastways, a big red buck that the ginerel ingaged for a guide sed that thar was and that he could fetch him by a short cut through the mountains slap into the camp and save five miles."

"Curse the luck!" cried the outlaw, unable to repress the anger that he felt at being thus baffled; "but who are you, anyway?" he asked, addressing the passenger.

"My name is Blair."

"From Yreka?"

"Yes."

"I reckon that I've heered on you. Well, throw out your dust. Toss it right down in the road!"

"I regret that I've only about ten dollars," the passenger replied, producing his wealth. "I never carry much money with me traveling, for you gentlemen are entirely too numerous. I've no other valuables, except a little silver watch that isn't worth five dollars, and I trust that you will allow me to keep that. If you doubt my word, search me!"

"We'll rake in the ten; keep your ticker."

The passenger thanked the outlaw, and tossed his money upon the road.

"And now drive on with your go-cart, and jest give my compliments to the general when you git to Candle-box; tell him to quit, dust, vamoze as soon as possible or else get measured for a coffin, for he'll need it if he stays up in this hyer region!" the road-agent cried.

"One moment, my friend!" exclaimed the passenger, as the outlaw turned his horse to retreat into the pines; "wherefore are you 'down' on the general?"

"Don't he own the Candle-box mine?"

"Yes, I believe so."

"Well, stranger, it's going to be mighty on-healthy up in this region for any man that owns a squar' inch of that air property, and the Blood-red Hand says so!"

And with this covert threat the road-agent rode into the pines and was soon hidden from sight. His companions followed his example, and the coach was free to proceed.

CHAPTER II.

THE KNIFE IN THE TREE.

CANDLE-BOX CAMP was an extremely queer name for a settlement, but then in our far western land fancy runs riot, and the bearded child of the Orient despises the trammels of civilization, and prides himself that in a new land he cuts loose from the slavish customs natural to an old one.

And good reason, too, had the settlement to the name, for was it not upon record that the original discoverer of the mine, from whence the Camp took its appellation, bought the valuable knowledge from a Digger Indian, who gladly showed where the golden store lay hid in consideration of the remains of a box of candles, that the explorer happened to have along with him?

The fortunate white man was a petty trader, who supplied a few of the upper camps along Rogue river.

As it is well known, the Digger Indians are the meanest of all the western tribes, living almost entirely on roots which they dig out of the earth; hence their name.

The candles, to the mind of the untutored red-man, seemed like a rare tid-bit, for the Diggers are passionately fond of fat; so he bartered away the secret of the mine in the little lonely valley in the foothills of the Cascade range, and Candle-box Camp came to have a local habitation and a name.

It was not a particularly rich strike, and although there was a great rush thence, at first, the excitement soon "played out," and now, at the time of which we write, a year from the date of the original discovery, there were some forty people in and around the valley.

The principal mine was called the "Candle-box," the lode which the Indian had revealed, and this was the only one that amounted to anything, the rest being small claims worked by hand labor.

The Candle-box property, though, possessed a fine stamp-mill, and was tolerably well arranged.

But a most unlucky speculation the Candle-box mine had proven to all who had ever taken hold of it, the original discoverer of the lode excepted. He, like a wise man, had never attempted to develop the mine, but had contented himself with selling out, at a big figure, to a party of Frisco sharps, who had formed a company to work the lode.

Everything went wrong from the beginning, and although there seemed to be no doubt that the vein really was a rich one yet the expenses ate up all the profits, and more too.

It seemed to be an unlucky "strike;" miners are generally very superstitious, and are firm believers in luck, and from the first the Candle-box property became the sport of fortune. All sorts of strange accidents happened to the machinery; something was continually breaking or getting out of order; twice all the buildings of the works took fire and burnt to the ground.

The men who were then running the thing strongly believed that the hand of private malice could be discerned in this, but they couldn't prove it—in fact, had no foundation, whatever, beyond their suspicions to work upon; so all they could do was to "grin and bear it," but they got rid of the property as soon as they could.

The mine changed owners often.

Only a single year since the Candle-box property had been developed, and yet it had been held by five different parties. The fifth owner, General Cadwalader Skeppleton, a fat, good-natured looking old gentleman, with a smoothly-shaven face, and a wonderfully curly brown wig, accompanied by his daughter, a tall, handsome, stately blonde, and another young lady, who was short, fat, red-haired, yet pretty, guided by a squirrel-looking red-skin, had that morning arrived at the Camp, and proceeded to take possession of the property.

The general was a New Yorker, a retired merchant of great wealth, so report said, who had come to the Pacific slope with the express intention of dabbling in mining speculations.

The general—the title was merely an honorary one, by the way—was "green," he was a "flat," he had no "sand," and the "boys" went for him, in California parlance.

In brief, they "stuck" the New Yorker by selling him the Candle-box mine for sixty thousand dollars.

And now the old gentleman had come to put the property into working order.

The inhabitants of the Camp were a queer lot; they did not tell the new owner how badly he had been taken in; on the contrary, every man said, gravely, that there was, no doubt, a heap of money in the mine, if it could be got out. This little "if," it was, that had so disgusted the previous owners.

But, strange to say, there wasn't a man in the town that seemed to care to take the position of managing man of the mine. The general, of course, knew nothing about practical mining and wanted a good person to take full charge.

He offered a liberal salary, but found no takers.

There was a strange superstition abroad that it was dangerous to run the Candle-box!

The last three superintendents had suffered; one had been shot—openly shot in broad daylight, and no one knew who fired the shot; another had been knifed, after nightfall, the stroke given in the back, and so quickly and cunningly that the wounded man was not able to describe his assailant.

The third man had been poisoned, or at least it seemed like that, for he had been taken deathly sick, and only recovered after a severe illness.

Naturally, then, as these three men had no foes that they knew of, the settlement came to the opinion that some daring, unscrupulous man had a grudge against the mine and intended to satisfy his anger by attacking the men who happened to be at the head of the concern.

In this dilemma then, the general put in practice the old device, which, in the East had always proved effective. He advertised for a man, not in the columns of a newspaper, for there wasn't any near at hand, but a big pine-tree stood by the mine and on the tree he nailed a placard, reading as follows:

"Wanted, a superintendent for the Candle-box mine. Good wages will be paid. Apply on premises, to General Skeppleton."

The old gentleman tacked the sign, which he dextrously painted with a marking-brush on a box-cover, on the tree, in the afternoon; all the townsmen had seen and read it before nine that night; the subject was pretty well canvassed in the two saloons which the Camp boasted, and bets were freely offered of two—even three to one, that no man who knew anything about the mine would be foolish enough to risk his life by taking the management; so the Camp retired to sleep, well satisfied that the general's device would come to naught.

But, when the morning came the men of Candle-box saw a strange sight.

Through the general's placard a strong arm had driven an eight-inch bowie-knife and left it sticking in the tree—the knife driven in so tightly that it was plainly apparent that it would take a great deal of force to get the steel out again, and, right underneath the knife was the plain imprint of a bloody hand.

The coach had reached the Camp the previous evening, and the driver's story of the road-agents had spread all over town long before midnight; so, when the men of Candle-box saw this ominous sign blazoned upon the general's placard, they understood at once what it meant.

The masked road-agent, who had assumed such a fearful device, had proclaimed war to the knife.

The old general was amazed; he put on his spectacles and looked at the knife as though he expected that the senseless steel would speak and reveal the mystery.

But, if the knife spoke not, the miners did, and soon the owner was in full possession of the strange story of the mine and equally strange tale of the attack on the coach by the road-agents; at which the general was perplexed.

But now his daughter's wit came to his aid.

"Tell the citizens that you wish to speak to them to-night; they will all be in town then," she counseled. "The moon is bright and will afford plenty of light for the meeting. Tell them that you are going to run the mine at any cost, and that you rely upon your neighbors' aid to support you against this unknown foe."

The advice was good, and the general adopted the plan.

The night came. The news that the Candle-box man, as the old general was now termed, was going to "speak a piece" did not take long to spread abroad; so, about eight o'clock there was quite a little crowd gathered near the shaft.

The general came out and mounted a barrel; he wasn't much of a hand at speech-making, and a mighty poor fist he made of it.

"Gentlemen and fellow-citizens," he said; "I am a stranger to this part of the country, but I have pitched my tent here and it is my intention to abide some time in this district if I am allowed so to do. The meaning of this road-agent's attack on me I don't understand, in the least. I haven't got anything to do with his bloody hand, nor with anybody else's bloody hand. It is my intention to run this mine if I can, and get out of it some of the money that I have put into it. I am in want of a first-class man to manage the mine, and to such a man I will give—"

"A pine coffin!" cried a deep voice, coming from no one knew where.

The general stared, and the miners with wondering eyes gazed at one another, but the bold speaker remained undetected.

The speaker's ideas were totally routed by this rude interruption, but, as he stared around him, a new actor appeared upon the scene.

The man was a well-built, medium-sized stranger who had that very day rode into the Camp and put up at the Happy Palace, as the restaurant, liquor-saloon hotel kept by Molly Missouri was called. He had said, briefly, that he was a speculator, and most all who saw him had at once set him down for a man who "speculated" more in cards than anything else—a traveling gambler, in brief, seeking fresh fields and pastures new.

"General, this hyer is an outrage, and my blood b'iles ag'in' it!" he exclaimed. "I'll take the management of this mine, and risk the pine coffin, if you say so. I can give you a heap of recommendations in regard to my mining skill and we won't quarrel about terms; so if you say the word, I'm your man; my name is Richard Talbot, and I'm from Cinnabar—up in the Shasta Valley."

A year had elapsed since the time when Talbot had had his memorable fight with the Governor of the State, as related in the story of "Captain Dick," and a year blots out many things, hence it was that there was not a man in the throng who fully remembered this hero of a hundred fights.

CHAPTER III.

TWO CALIFORNIAN SHARPS.

THE general at once accepted the proposal.

"Call upon me to-morrow," he said, "and we will arrange the terms; and now, fellow-citizens, I hope sincerely that there won't be any more trouble."

The old gentleman then retired, Talbot sauntered off toward the hotel, and the crowd dispersed.

Two men encountered each other as they strolled up the street; the recognition was mutual.

"Hallo, McCracken, is that you?"

"Be the powers! if it isn't Mister Blair!"

With Randolph Blair, the famous bonanza king, reputed to be one of the wealthiest speculators on the Pacific slope, the reader is already acquainted, and the other party was fully as notorious a man as the brawny Blair.

His name was McCracken—Cornelius McCracken, and he was known far and wide as the Member from Siskiyou. He was a demagogue of the worst stripe, one of the men who had risen to power by riding on the waves of popular clamor. Report said, too, that he had "feathered his nest" pretty well.

Ten years before the time of which we write he had done a brick-laying job for Blair in Frisco, that being his trade, and since that time Blair had never seen him, although he had watched his career with a great deal of interest, for it was really curious to follow the gradual climb to power of such a brainless upstart, who had nothing but impudence and muscle to back him.

"Well, McCracken, it's a good many years since we have met," Blair observed, as he and the demagogue walked on side by side.

"Yes, sur, an' it's meself that has changed wonderfully since that time, do ye mind?" replied the other, swelling up with conscious pride. "I'm a man of the people, Mister Blair, and mighty well it pays me, too," he added, sinking his voice to a confidential whisper. "Fifteen years ago, sur, I was carrying a hod at two dollars a day, but now, sur, now luck at me! I'm the Honorable Mister McCracken. I sit in the council halls of me country. I make the laws, and if the pay isn't very good the st'ailings are immense!"

Blair laughed; he hadn't the least doubt in regard to this.

"But, I say, McCracken, what are you doing up in this region?"

The Irishman winked at the speculator, slyly. "Suppose I put the same question to you, Mister Blair?"

"Well, I should probably lie to you," the sharp answered, freely and unblushingly.

"Faith, I know that I would!" the demagogue admitted.

"That means that your business is important."

"No more than yours, maybe," replied McCracken, slyly.

"Well, Mac, to tell you the truth, for I don't see the use of beating about the bush when two such old blades as you and I are concerned, the moment I saw you I at once jumped to the conclusion that the business which brought you to this delightful hole was exactly the same as fetched me here."

"Be me sowl! Mister Blair, the same thought occurred to me."

"You are after this mine?"

"So are you."

"Oh, yes, I own it," Blair said, frankly. "I have been informed that it is a very valuable mine, indeed, but needs money to develop it."

"Shure, I was told that it was all right now, for a man to take hold of and get a big stake."

"It isn't so, Mac; there's got to be fifty thousand dollars spent on it before a man can make a cent out of it, but then it will be a bonanza."

"And you hope to get it?"

"Well, yes; and now, how do you propose to act in this matter? Are you strong enough to fight me?"

"Divil a bit, an' I'd be a fool to try it! Let me in for a share an' I'll do all I kin for yees."

"All right; that's a bargain! I suppose you have a good deal of influence with some of the miners, even up in this God-forsaken spot?"

"Oh, yis; there's some of the byes that know me—pretty hard byes they are, too."

"Yes, more sinners than saints in this region, and I presume that this ingenious device of the blood-red hand is some of your doing?"

"Upon me sowl, it isn't!" the Irishman declared, and from the earnest way in which he spoke Blair felt pretty certain that he was speaking the truth. "I niver was more astonished in me life than when I heard of it."

The face of the bonanza king darkened, and a thoughtful look appeared upon it.

"I am at fault, then," he observed, after quite a long pause. "I supposed that it was a clever trick of yours to frighten the old man out of the mine."

"No, sir; I was going to work in another way. I was going to let them git into operation and then git up a strike among the hands."

"It's deuced queer! there is somebody else after the mine, then, for of course this road-agent has not made his threats without an object. And now, our first task must be to find out *who that somebody is*."

"He'll be sure to show his hand in time."

"Oh, yes, no doubt about it, and this party is all that we have to fear, for it will not be a difficult job to get the old general out."

"Is *that* so? Shure! I thought that he was roulling in riches."

"Quite the contrary; he is a broken, bankrupt man. He was once at the head of a big business at the East, but finally went under and now all the money that he has in the world is some ten thousand dollars that he inherited from his deceased wife."

"And I suppose that he put all that into this mine?"

"Yes, and run in debt forty thousand dollars more. I hold that leetle claim against him."

"Oh, murder and turf! you've got him foul!"

"I flatter myself that I have managed the affair pretty well," Blair observed, complacently.

"In fact, for a small matter I've taken a great deal of trouble, but—and now, Mac, I'm going to confide a secret to you—I am peculiarly interested in this matter."

"I don't understand," said McCracken, who in some respects was not as bright as he might be.

"Did you not notice that tall, handsome girl, the general's daughter?"

"I did that same."

"Well, sir, that girl is the proudest minx that ever stepped foot in shoe leather!" the speculator exclaimed, decidedly. "Would you believe it, Mac, that particular, dainty young lady actually refused to be introduced to me in Frisco because she understood that I was not so scrupulous in my business dealings as I might be?"

The Irishman burst into a loud laugh.

"Oh, did anybody ever hear the likes of that? You, the bonanza king! Oh, the gurl was crazy!"

"No, but possessed of a cursed stuck-up pride which I have sworn to humble before she gets out of this hyer State of California; and I'll keep my word, too."

"You have only to turn your hand over to crush her."

"Ah, but that won't satisfy me!" Blair exclaimed, quickly. "To be frank with you, McCracken, I want this girl, and I have made up my mind to have her. I ain't much on women; I have been too busy all my life to pay much attention to them; but now that I am pretty well fixed, I begin to think that it is about time that I settled down. I want a handsome, dashy girl—a regular clipper and no mistake, you know; and this hyer gal jest fills the bill."

"You'll be revenged by making her Mrs. Blair?"

"That is exactly my leetle gait, Mac, and that is the strong motive for my fooling away my time with this mine, although I have been told, by good authority, that if I go to work the right way, it will turn out a bonanza. You see, my game is an extremely simple one. The old man owes me now about forty thousand dollars, and I tell you he's got one of the best creditors that mortal man ever had, for he's never pushed for the money—in fact, he has been told time and time again that if he wanted more money all he had to do was to ask for it."

"And does he know that it is *your* money?"

"Oh, no; that is where the joke comes in. He hasn't the slightest idea that I am his creditor. I have schemed to tangle the old fellow all up in debt, and then, when the crash comes, there's no man in the world that can help him out but myself."

"And you think the gurl, then, will be glad to accept ye?"

"Well, I reckon that she will, for I'll put the old man in a very tight place and she will be the only soul in this world that can get him out. It's a strange fancy, Mac, you know, when you come to think the matter over, that a man like myself, who can have a dozen handsome women just for the asking, should take so much trouble to get a girl who, I am morally certain, will hate me as bitterly as a girl can hate; but I'm like the barbarian chief that I saw on the stage at the California theater, the other night: 'I love my horse when it rears, my dogs when

they snarl,' and, I forget the rest of it, but them's my sentiments exactly."

"Oh, I understand; shure! it's the pleasure and delight of conquering."

"Now, the programme, Mac, is—we must make all the trouble we can for the old man; we must hinder the working of the mine in every possible way, of course taking care to keep ourselves in the background."

"Of course; but, I say, how about this man that isn't afraid to go into the mine, this Mister Talbot? His name is mighty familiar to me."

"Yes, so it is to me, but I don't remember ever seeing him before. Oh, he won't trouble us. We'll either buy him over to our side, or frighten him out of the camp."

"And this road-agent—this blood-red hand feller?"

"Ah! now there you get me!" Blair replied, thoughtfully. "We must find out about him. At present, though, in playing his game he helps us, but I reckon that when the end comes he'll be apt to step in and quarrel with us over the division of the carcass."

"That would be ugly."

"Yes; but that time is some distance off, and I'll take care to be prepared for all emergencies."

And so the bargain was made between the two. The old general had little suspicion of the new rock ahead.

CHAPTER IV.

THE HAPPY PALACE.

CANDLE-BOX, take it all in all, was about as odd a Camp as could be found in all California. The principal saloon and hotel—there were only two in the settlement—was kept by a woman, and it was called the Happy Palace.

We said a woman; but, to speak more correctly, we should have said a girl, for the owner of the ranch was nothing more. She was known as Molly Missouri. Her father, a regular old bummer if ever there was one, had been one of the first pilgrims to settle in the valley, but he was no benefit to the town, and there were few mourners when he fell down in a fit, one night after a prolonged spree, in the single saloon that the Camp then possessed.

"No good to nobody, nohow," was the epitaph that the miners furnished.

But, public opinion was wrong as public opinion often is; the man was some good to the fine, buxom girl, his daughter, the only woman in the Camp. Old, idle bummer as he was, he had always managed to take pretty good care of her.

Old Missouri he was always called, as he was forever bragging about his native State. He was a "Pike" from Missouri, as the natives of that county are generally termed. Now that he was gone and his daughter left unprotected, the miners came to the conclusion that they ought to do something for the orphan, so a committee was appointed to wait upon her after the funeral was over.

Molly was a tall, strong, handsome girl, with a tow head and muscle like a prize-fighter—a resolute, go-ahead sort of a feminine, as the committee soon discovered.

The men of the Camp had "chipped" in and had succeeded in raising a hundred and ten dollars, which the spokesman of the committee, in a set speech, presented to the girl.

The gist of the speech was:

"The Camp feels bad for yer; we ain't on blue gravel (good pay dirt) as much as we ought to be, but hyer's our level best and good luck go with you, so say all of us."

"Much obliged, boys," replied the girl, accepting the offering instantly; as one of the "boys" afterward remarked—"She was as pert and chippy and as sassy a gal as any one could scare up in a long journey."

"And as for the good luck that you wish me, why, that depends upon the men in this hyer Camp," she continued. "I reckoned of course that I would have to paddle my own canoe now, and so I've hired Cohen's shanty, and I'm going to open a first-class hotel there just as soon as I kin get ready."

Cohen was an enterprising Hebrew who had erected quite a large shanty and started a general store at the time of the first rush into the valley, but, with the decline of the excitement, he had departed. Two or three parties had tried their luck in the shanty but all had failed, as the rent was steep—the express company had come into possession of the building—and there really wasn't room for more than one general store in the Camp, and the man that kept the other place, Judge Zebulon Gubble, was altogether too well "fixed" to be easily run out.

Great was the astonishment, then, in Candle-box when the news spread around that the orphan girl was going to open a hotel.

The idea seemed ridiculous, but Molly's disposition was pretty well known; she was a girl who wouldn't stand any nonsense from any one, and the miners, in discussing the matter, were all of the opinion that if any "gal" could run a hotel, Molly Missouri most certainly was that gal.

The enterprise was a success from the start;

the Camp needed a respectable place of entertainment, for the only saloon that had survived the crash that followed the flush times of the original discovery was a mean, low whisky shop.

The Happy Palace, Molly named her venture, and under one roof, a hotel, a drinking-saloon, dining-room, private apartment for gentlemen who desired to indulge in a quiet game of cards, and a barber-shop could be found.

The barber-shop was almost a luxury, for the men of the Camp cared little whether their beards grew or not, but the barber, who was an almond-eyed Chinese, depended fully as much upon his skill as a gambler as he did upon his leather-brush and razor, and so he managed to scrape along—no pun intended, by the way.

True it had not been all smooth sailing for the girl. Disturbances had arisen. Men would drink and quarrel, and strangers to Molly sometimes thought that they could impose upon her seeing that she was a lone woman.

Molly, though, was as full of grit as a mountain lion, and she always went armed; the dextrous manner too in which on three or four occasions she had whipped out her revolvers and planted them under the nose of some big-bearded scallywag, who was loud in boast that he was a "chief" and never "took water" in his life, was really something to talk about.

And there had always been a flash in the eyes of the girl which had awed the turbulent spirits, and caused them to betake themselves and their vaunts to other quarters.

At the Happy Palace Talbot had secured accommodations upon arriving in the town, and after the meeting had dispersed, to the hotel he had wended his way.

He had sauntered along slowly, so that the most of the crowd were already in the saloon when he arrived there.

The main floor of the hotel was divided into three apartments, one large front room, which held the bar and was the general lounging-place of the Camp, and two smaller apartments in the rear of the main one; one was the "private room," where nightly festive "poker" reigned, and the other the dining-room.

Talbot, who was not acquainted with a soul in the Camp, helped himself to a chair by the window, quite apart from the crowd, and sat down.

It was some time since he had figured in one of these little camps, and as he gazed at the miners grouped around the apartment—nearly all eyes bent on him—old memories came thick upon him.

Molly, assisted by the Chinaman, Hop Hi, who was a general man of all work, was behind the bar, busily engaged attending to her customers, but the moment Talbot entered she caught sight of him.

There were two or three little groups standing by the counter, but Molly never heeded them in the least as she turned and addressed the Chinese.

"Did Mister Man over thar pony up in advance for his lodging?" she asked, indicating Talbot.

The Chinaman shook his head.

"I must go and talk to him," Molly observed, decidedly; "he's a stranger, and perhaps he don't know that cash down and no trust is the rule of this ranch."

The girl came from behind the bar and advanced directly to Talbot, while the miners winked at each other—that is, the most of them did, but a group of three at the end of the bar neither winked nor seemed to enjoy the fun.

"She suspects something, and has gone to put him on his guard!" exclaimed one of the men in a cautious tone. "You remember that I warned you a little while ago that you were speaking too loud and that I thought the girl was listening."

"What does it matter?" one of the others retorted, in a boastful sort of way. "This pilgrim kin be salivated easy enough, and I won't have to half try either."

By this time Molly was at Talbot's side. "I don't want to disturb you, stranger," she said, "but if you want to lodge here to-night, it's the rule of the house to pay in advance."

"Certainly; here's five on account," Talbot replied, putting a gold-piece into her hand.

"Be on your guard! You are in danger," she exclaimed, quickly, under her breath, as she bent her head to examine the gold-piece, then testing its worth by biting it.

Talbot, although about as cool a man as ever breathed Californian air, was somewhat astonished at this information.

"Wherefore danger?" he asked, quietly, never betraying his surprise by a movement of the muscles of his face.

"The Candle-box mine is bad luck to the men that work in it."

"I hope to prove that isn't so before I get through with this hyer Camp," he answered, carelessly.

An admiring look appeared in the keen, gray eyes of the girl; the coolness of the man took her fancy.

"Look out; that's all; but they sha'n't double-bank you till I 'pass' out of the game. You're sure that it's good, eh?" she exclaimed aloud, so that all could hear. "Well, I'll take

your word for it, although it does look queer to me." She then returned to the bar.

"So, you've gone back on me, eh?" said the tall, brawny man with the stolid, deathlike face, who was leaning against the bar, and who had warned his companions that the girl had overheard their words.

"Eh?" and there was an uneasy look in Molly's eyes.

"Oh, you know what I mean! Have you picked him out for a partner at the first glance?"

"What nonsense!" the girl cried, but there was a quiver in her lip as she spoke.

"I'm sorry for you, for Bill hyer is going to smash him."

Molly turned away—it was plain that she was mistrusted.

"Go for him!" commanded the tall man.

The brawny fellow at once obeyed.

He rolled with a sailor-like gait over toward Talbot, who at once rose to receive him.

"I'm the chief of this hyer town!" the bully said. "I'm Kanaka Bill, the sweet William of the Klamath. I kin drive a lance clean through a whale! You look like a regular snorter, you do! Say! jest wipe yer paw across my face?"

And Talbot obeyed this injunction on the instant, much to the surprise of all, the ex-whale-man included, for the wipe was such a violent crack with the open hand that it fairly brought tears to the eyes of the assailed man!

CHAPTER V.

TAMING THE BRUTE.

A HOWL like the bellow of an enraged bull came from the throat of the bully. Never in all his life had he been so surprised, for the attack had been so sudden that for a moment he could hardly realize that it was the man whom he had accosted that had smacked him.

The first moment of surprise over, Bill grabbed for his pistols, the revolvers which hung suspended in holsters at his waist, but Talbot was prepared for this.

Little suspicion had any one in the room that the man, who had been selected for a victim, was one of the best two-handed fighters that had ever stepped foot in the Golden State.

Kanaka Bill's hands were no sooner on his pistols, than Talbot's gripe of steel had him by the throat and waist.

There was a sudden, powerful movement, and then the big bully, raised bodily from the floor, was hurled headlong through the window, carrying away, with a loud crash, sash, glass and all.

With a heavy thud the man struck on the ground outside, bleeding from a dozen scratches where the window-glass had cut him.

And hardly had he struck when Talbot was on him, having leaped lightly through the window. He plucked the revolvers from their holsters, the knife from its sheath, and when the crowd, rushing wildly through both door and window, reached the outer air, they found Talbot in complete possession of the field.

"Now, then, gentlemen, how shall I kill him?" Talbot exclaimed, as the crowd came rushing out. "Knife him, or blow the top of his thick fool's head off?"

"Give me a chance for my life!" yelled Bill, scrambling to his feet, and in no ways subdued by the defeat which he had met with. "You can't down me in a fair fight, if you give me any show!"

"Give the man a fair chance!" cried a voice in the crowd.

"Yes, yes, give him another chance," suggested Lean Tom Johnson, who had got it into his head that the new-comer could easily flax the bully of the camp, and who was anxious to see more fun.

"Oh, well, if the court thinks that the man ought to have another trial, I'm agreeable," Talbot replied, in his cool, careless way, and then, with a whirl, he sent the revolver and the knife whizzing through the air into the river.

A yell of disgust came from the lips of the brawny bully, as he beheld his property sink beneath the wave.

"I'll take 'em out of your hide!" he cried, fiercely, rolling up the sleeves of his discolored flannel shirt, and so preparing for action.

Talbot merely laid aside his coat, and turned up the sleeves of the "biled" shirt which he wore.

"Are you ready?" cried the brawny fellow, burning with impatience to demolish the man who had handled him so roughly.

"All ready, sir," replied the other, who apparently was not at all ready, seeing that he held his hands down at the level of his waist, while his opponent's fists were sawing the air like a windmill.

The story of the encounter is briefly told. The big fellow rushed at his nimble antagonist with all the fury of an enraged buffalo bull, and with about as much clumsiness.

Talbot gave ground as dextrously as a dancing-master, stopping every blow aimed at his person in the most skillful manner, and then, when the other, out of breath, completely winded, was forced to pause and put down his arms in sheer fatigue, with a lightning-like stroke of his strong right hand, that had always

served him so well, Talbot gave the big man a most terrific crack right in the center of the chest, and over backward the bully went, striking the earth with a terrible concussion.

Many a powerful blow, skillfully delivered, had the men of the crowd seen, but not one of them had ever witnessed a more terrific stroke.

That one blow ended the contest, for Kanaka lay upon the ground as helpless as a log—literally “knocked out of time.”

“He’s dead!” cried one of the amazed bystanders, hastening to the assistance of the fallen man.

“Oh, no; he’s worth a dozen dead men yet,” Talbot reassured.

Some of the miners ran into the hotel, procured a pitcher of water and dashed it over the face of the vanquished bruiser. This at once revived him. He sat up and looked around him with a vacant air; it was plain that for the moment his wits were “wool-gathering.”

“Oh!” he grunted, “I feel as if a mule had kicked me.”

“No, a two-story shanty fell on you,” one of the bystanders suggested, and thereupon the crowd laughed.

Then Kanaka Bill’s eyes rested upon the stalwart figure of Talbot, and a wondering look crept over his face. He rose slowly to his feet, then shook himself as if to be certain that he was all right.

“Time!” cried Talbot, laconically, advancing as he spoke and putting himself in a fighting position.

“No more for me, hoss-fly!” exclaimed Bill, decidedly. “I have got all I want. I never was made to take water afore in this hyer Camp, but I reckon that I’ll crawfish now. You’re the heftiest man for your inches that I ever faced, and I’m done, I am.”

“You are quite satisfied, then?”

“Yes,” growled the bully, angrily, “I am quite satisfied that I ain’t got any right to fool around you, but maybe in the long run I’ll get squar’ with a man ’bout your size for handling me jest as if I didn’t cost nothin’, nohow!”

“Let us close the account now,” responded the victor. “I hate to have anything of this kind on my mind. Some gentleman in the crowd hyer will gladly lend you a knife or a pistol, I am sure, and if you are only going to be satisfied with a fatal end to this difficulty, the quicker then we get at it the better.”

But bold Kanaka Bill, the bully of the Camp, had altogether too much steel taken out of him to accept this frank and open defiance, although he knew well enough that to back down now meant the loss of his hard-earned reputation as a man-eater.

“Come, which is it to be?” cried Talbot, perceiving that the other hesitated, “knife or pistol? Take your choice, quick, for I’m tired of waiting, and if this Camp needs a graveyard, you’ll be just as good a man to start it with as I know.”

The crowd were watching the scene with breathless interest. Not that they expected Bill to accept the challenge, for they did not; rightly they judged that the taste he already had experienced of the stranger’s quality was quite sufficient to last him for some time.

“I don’t want neither knife nor pistol,” Bill replied, doggedly.

“Oh, you don’t want to end the matter now? You want to leave the quarrel open?”

“Yes.”

“So that you can shoot or stick me in the back some time, eh?” cried Talbot, his voice clear and cutting as a knife.

The bully knew not what to say and so perforce held his tongue.

“Well, I don’t propose that you shall do anything of the kind,” Talbot continued. “I mean that this quarrel shall be settled now. Take your weapon like a man and stand up to your work, or else own up that you are satisfied and that you desire no further quarrel with me.”

“S’pose I don’t do either?” demanded Bill, sullenly.

“Well, then I’ll shoot you on sight the first time I meet you!” cried the other, sternly, “and I appeal to the crowd if I am not justified in so acting.”

Even in the wildest camps and among the roughest men the code of arms and honor holds good.

To shoot or stab a man without warning is assassination; but if two men with a quarrel to be settled, meet, by chance, each calls upon the other to “draw” and fire, and the end is the death of one of the parties, public sentiment upholds the killer; he was attacked and he had a right to defend himself; anyhow, it was a fair fight and no favor!

“I can’t fight without we’pons that I’m used to!” Bill exclaimed, sullenly. “You’ve corraled my shooting-irons, but arter I fotch ’em out of the river, I’ll give you a sight for your money; mebbe to-morrow, mebbe next day; anyhow, I don’t want nothin’ but a fair show.”

“All right, I’m agreeable; the next time we meet then it’s shoot on sight.”

“You bet!” cried the beaten man, savagely, and then he turned upon his heel and walked away.

Talbot picked up his coat and put it on.

Three figures came from the shadow of one of the shanties where they had stood in the background and watched the scene, and passed down the street.

The three were General Skeppleton, his daughter and the young lady friend who had come with her up into this wild region, Miss Pollie Jones, daughter of the late Judge Jones who once struck it so rich at Angel’s Bar.

They had been out for a walk and had happened to come along just in time to witness the affray.

“Well, well, I wouldn’t have believed that that fellow would ever have been able to stand up against the big ruffian,” the general observed.

“He’s just as sweet as ever he can be!” Miss Jones exclaimed. She was a very romantic young lady, and much disposed to “gush” upon the slightest excuse.

“Why, Polly, how can you take an interest in such a wild, rude fellow?” Desdemona asked. The general’s daughter was named after Shakespeare’s sweetest, purest heroine. “Indeed, I am heartily sick of this region now; the men here seem to be but little better than so many wild beasts.”

CHAPTER VI.

THE COUNCIL OF THREE.

THE general and the two ladies were not the only parties who had stood in the background and witnessed the discomfiture of the great fighting man of the Camp.

The speculator and his companion, the wily Irishman, had also overlooked the scene.

“Holy Moses!” cried McCracken, after the affair was over and the crowd had dispersed, “but isn’t this fellow a tearer?”

“Oh, yes, he knows how to handle himself,” Blair replied, carelessly, for he was not particularly impressed by Talbot’s skill. “You see, he knows how to use his fists and the other fellow don’t. But, you put a man who knows anything about boxing in front of this Talbot and he wouldn’t make much of a fist.”

“Bedad! if I had the art at me finger ends, it would take a dale to induce me to stand up afore him!” McCracken declared.

“He’ll be a good man for us; you must sound him, Mac.”

The Irishman shook his head.

“What do you mean?” the speculator asked; “don’t you think that he will be a good man for us?”

“Oh, yes, a foine man, but I’m not aisy in my mind about getting him.”

“There will be no trouble about that; all these fellows have their price; some cost more than others, but you can fetch any of them if you bid high enough.”

The Irishman nodded; he did not think that it was worth his while to dispute the point with Blair, but in his own mind he had come to the conclusion from what he had already seen of the new manager of the Candle-box mine that anybody would have a pretty difficult task to sway him.

McCracken, although an uncultivated man, almost entirely without education, yet was possessed of a large amount of natural shrewdness, and was an extremely good judge of human nature; he rarely made a mistake in the estimate of his fellow-mortals, and it was this trait, that, more than anything else had made him the power he really was, in the political world.

The night passed away without further incident, and although there was a great deal of talk about the probable results of the hostile meeting which was certain to take place at an early date between the combatants of that evening, yet, as Talbot had retired to rest, and Kanaka Bill had “made himself scarce,” the actual presence of either of the two did not encourage the gossip.

The unprovoked attack of the bully upon the stranger gave rise to no comment, for Kanaka Bill, when he had a little liquor aboard, was known to be quarrelsome, and no one, excepting Molly Missouri, suspected that a deeper motive than mere bravado was at the bottom of the bully’s demonstration.

Morning came, and after the denizens of the Camp had got their breakfast, before they departed for their daily toil, they looked around to see if Kanaka Bill was in the Camp on hostile mission bent.

But no one had seen him, and after Talbot had made his appearance, got his breakfast and walked down to the Candle-box property, the anxious hungerers after excitement concluded that there wouldn’t be any blood and slaughter that day.

Evidently the “chief” of Candle box Camp, as he was wont to proudly term himself, was not over and above anxious to meet the plucky stranger in single fight.

The Candle-box property was not a very extensive one. It was situated right on the river’s bank, and a rude stockade fence inclosed it on three sides; the river prevented intrusion on the fourth.

Within the stockade, which was pierced by a single gate on the south side, was the mouth of the shaft, the mill with the stamps for crushing the ore, a tool and store-house, and a good-sized

shanty, which the general had selected for his dwelling-place.

At present the works only boasted of a single hand, a coal-black negro of gigantic size, who answered to the name of Ginger Blue, and who had been connected with the mine as a sort of watchman ever since the organization of the first company and the sinking of the shaft.

Through thick and thin, through good and evil fortune—much evil and little good, so far—Ginger had stuck faithfully to the mine, and there was no convincing him that the Candle-box lode wasn’t the richest mine in all the known world.

It didn’t matter a particle to Ginger whether he got any wages or not; he stuck to his work as well without as with, and when hard times had come and the mining speculators, utterly broke, were unable not only to pay wages but to provide “grub,” Ginger never grumbled in the least; there were fish in the river, and game on the hills; and then, too, the darkey was a pretty good poker-player, and so he managed to live and stick to the mine even when all else had forsaken it.

He had presented himself to the general the moment the new owner had arrived in the Camp, and made known to him how faithful and devoted a servant he had been to the Candle-box lode, for it was to the mine that Ginger considered he owed allegiance and not to the individuals who at times controlled the property.

The general, who was, at heart, a jolly old fellow, and as innocent as a child of the “ways that are dark and tricks that are vain,” so peculiar not only to the Heathen Chinese but to the average sharp of the Pacific slope, took a decided fancy to the negro, who was really a comical character, and therefore engaged him on the spot.

Ginger was the most indifferent fellow in the world as regards wages.

“How much, boss?” he said, reflectively, in answer to the general’s question; “well, that depends upon promisc’us circumstances. I’d like to be sure of my grub, anyway, ’cause I don’t s’pose dat dere’ll be much danger of my getting any’ing else.”

“Oh, you’ll get your money,” the general declared, astonished that there should be any doubt on this subject.

“Yes, sah, dat’s w’at dey all say!” Ginger replied, grinning, until he showed his white teeth from ear to ear. “De las’ gemman sed dat I would pay in advance; so he did; but he borrowed it all back fore de week was out, ’cause I was unlucky at poker. De money, boss, is gwine to trouble me so long as de grub am all right, but when it’s no money and no grub, I tell yer! it’s tough scratching for dis yere chile.”

The general, perceiving that there was very little use in attempting to persuade the negro that it was all right, gave up the purpose, contenting himself with engaging him.

At the gate of the stockade Talbot met the general, who received him very cordially, for the new man had made quite a favorable impression.

“You will take up your quarters hereafter on the premises,” Skeppleton said, as he conducted Talbot into the dwelling-house. “I have had a room fixed up for you, and although it is not particularly well provided with furniture, I presume that you won’t mind that.”

“Oh, no; a bunk is all I need.”

Within the main room of the house the two girls were seated, and the general, after conducting Talbot into the apartment, introduced the ladies.

“My daughter, Mr. Talbot, Miss Jones of Angels,” he said.

Desdemona bowed politely, but pretty Pollie Jones, who was an arrant flirt by nature, and who had made up her mind that a little flirtation with the good-looking miner would be quite agreeable, acknowledged the introduction in the most elaborate manner.

“I am so charmed to make your acquaintance, Mr. Talbot,” she exclaimed, gushingly. “I am sure that I have met you before somewhere, for your name is quite familiar to me. Were you ever at Angels? Perhaps you knew my pa—the late Judge Jones, who once struck it so rich at Angel’s Bar.”

“Yes, miss, I remember your father perfectly well, although I do not think that I ever had the pleasure of seeing you before,” Talbot answered, with perfect composure, although still fresh in his memory was the night when he rode into Angels disguised, and saw posted in every saloon and on every dead wall the land-bill got out by the Governor of the great State of California, offering one thousand dollars reward for the body of Richard Talbot, alive or dead.

“I’m so glad to have met you, Mr. Talbot, if you were acquainted with my pa.”

“Only very slightly acquainted,” Dick hastened to say.

“Well, sit down, Mr. Talbot; we must hold a council,” the general remarked. “My daughter here is going to act as my secretary, and therefore she is entitled to know our plans. Now then, sir, what do you think of these

threats against the mine? You have heard the story of how the road-agents stopped the coach in search of me?"

"Yes, sir."

"And now, another strange circumstance I wish to call your attention to. I did intend to come by the coach, but I happened to run across an Indian, who said that he knew a short cut east of the mountains, and the idea of the gallop through the wilderness pleased the fancy of these young ladies, and so we came that way. But, after we got here, the Indian disappeared and we have not seen him since. He has not come for his pay; something remarkable, you know. Now, then, has this mysterious Indian anything to do with these road-agents? Have I a secret friend up in this region who knew that I was going to be attacked by the road-agents and employed the Indian to guide me in by the other road?"

Talbot looked thoughtful; the question was indeed a puzzling one.

"As to that, sir," he said at last, "of course it is impossible to say. It certainly looks strange; but, as to the threats made against the mine, that matter is very clear to me. As far as I have heard the story of the property, ever since the discovery of the lode, it has suffered more or less from these secret attacks. The motive is clear enough; there is some party after the mine—somebody who thinks that there is money in the lode and yet is not rich enough to buy the control of the property. The scheme that they are working on is a very cunning one; by continually attacking the mine so as to embarrass the working of it, much can be done to hamper the works. Already four or five parties have given up the property in disgust, and if this sort of thing keeps on, the time will come when no one will want it, and then comes the chance of these parties who are working in the dark."

"Yes, but how can we discover who they are?" the general asked, anxiously.

"Well, I thought that I would kinder put myself forward as a target for them to strike at," Talbot answered, coolly. "If I am not killed, in time I must certainly find out who it is that is striking the blows."

CHAPTER VII.

MOLLY'S MISSION.

THE listeners looked at the speaker in astonishment. This was most decidedly the coolest proposition that any of them had ever heard.

"But, my dear sir!" exclaimed the general, in wonder, "you do not seem to comprehend that you are exposing yourself to certain death, perhaps?"

"Of course there is a risk, but man, in going through this world, is always taking his life in his hand more or less, and I am not really much afraid. I shall be on my guard against danger, of course, and he who is forewarned is forearmed, you know."

The impression this speech made upon the two girls was widely different. Polly opened her eyes in wonder; it amazed her that any man should thus coolly face death, but the general's daughter, with her cold, proud eyes looked searchingly at Talbot's face. Was the speech really the candid expression of a man who had calmly calculated the chances and was willing to risk his life, or was it the mere bravado, so common to the loud-talking frontiersman?

But Talbot with his cool, quiet way, appeared to have but little of the bully and the braggart in his disposition.

"Well," said the old gentleman, at last, "if you are willing to risk it, it's all right;" then he touched on the question of salary, but to his surprise the man was utterly indifferent. He was almost as bad as the negro. "Anything you like," he said, "until after you've tried me, and the mine, and see how the 'plant' is going to work."

And this was the only arrangement Talbot was willing to make, and so the general was forced to close the matter in that way.

While this interview was transpiring within the house an equally important one was going on outside the stockade.

By the door that led into the inclosure was a big rock which the negro generally utilized as a seat when he had no work to attend to, as it was exposed to the full rays of the sun, and so he could bask in the heat-giving light.

With a corn-cob pipe stuck between his teeth, Ginger was enjoying himself hugely, chuckling every now and then when he thought how soon the mine would be in working order again. The very life and soul of the negro seemed bound up in the lode. Suddenly he was surprised by the abrupt appearance of a woman.

Now, women were few and far between in Candle-box Camp, and therefore it was no wonder that the negro was surprised.

At the first glance, though, he recognized the girl, for a more generally known party than Molly Missouri existed not in that region.

The girl's face was flushed, and it was evident that she had been hurrying along at the top of her speed.

"Do you belong to the Candle-box mine now?" she asked, hurriedly, and almost out of breath.

"Do I belong to the mine now, honey!" he exclaimed, indignantly. "Well now you jes' better believes dat I does, and w'at's more, my bressed lamb! I'm allers gwine to belong to dis yere mine, jes' you bet all you got on dat!"

"I want to see Mr. Talbot!"

The negro burst into a loud laugh.

"Go 'way! ain't you 'shamed of yerself, runnin' 'round arter a feller! Go 'long! I blush for yer!"

"See hyer, you black rascal!" cried the girl, in a rage; "you are entirely too sassy, and you had better keep a civil tongue in your head. I want to see Mr. Talbot on particular business. Now, then, charcoal, walk your trotters in and tell him that a lady wants to see him."

"Oh, dat's too good! dat hits me whar I lib!" and the darky roared again. "You call yerself a lady! Go 'way! you ain't nothing but a gal!"

"You'll get your ears pulled, you impudent snowball!" the girl retorted. "But come, hurry up; I can't wait here all day."

"No gemmen ob de name of Talbot hyer," the black answered, with a great deal of dignity. "De ginerall am hyer—Ginerall Cadwalader Skeppleton, the proprietor of dis yere mine."

"It's the superintendent I want, Mr. Talbot; I know that he is here, for he left my place this morning to come here."

"Oh, yes, dat man! Oh, he's hyer. I disremember dat I ebber heered his name afore. And you want to see him, eh?"

"Yes, and I'm in a hurry, too!"

"All right; I'll luff him know dat you are hyer; you kin step inside de gate if you like."

This suited the girl exactly, for within the stockade she was concealed from the sight of any chance passer-by, and just about this time the negro's words had taken weight in her mind and she had come to the conclusion that perhaps she had acted rather foolishly in rushing like a madwoman down to the Candle-box works.

Ginger soon returned, followed by Talbot, who appeared surprised at the summons.

The negro's mode of informing the gentleman that a lady desired to see him was really unique.

He simply stuck his head in at the door with out even taking the trouble to knock and sung out:

"Say! is you Mister Talbot? If you is, dar's a gal out hyer dat wants to see you on very 'ticular business."

All within the room were surprised by the announcement, for, as before remarked, women were not plenty up along the Klamath river.

"If you will excuse me, general," Talbot said, "I will see who it is."

"Certainly," replied the old gentleman.

So Talbot followed the negro, while the two girls, with that curiosity so natural to woman-kind, went to the window that they might see who it was that sought Mr. Talbot.

Molly Missouri's eyes were as bright as a deer's and as keen too, and she instantly caught sight of the two faces framed in the window, and some way, why she could hardly have explained, a plainly perceptible scowl appeared upon her rather pretty face, for, despite the slight coarseness of her features, and the utter absence of all attempts to better her appearance by the artificial aids so dear to the heart of the average woman, Molly was far from being bad-looking.

"Ah, is it you, Miss Missouri?" Talbot said, addressing the girl as courteously as though she had been a duchess.

"Yes; I want to see you on particular business!" she exclaimed, quickly, evidently embarrassed, as the heightened color in her face plainly betrayed. "And if you will have the kindness to step this way so that I can say a few words to you in private," and then she glanced significantly at the negro.

Now, though the renowned Ginger was generally dull of comprehension, yet he had a certain degree of wit of his own and most decidedly was no fool, and he comprehended the girl's very apparent meaning just as quickly as Talbot, and it "riled" him, to use the vernacular.

"Look a-here, white gal!" he cried, indignantly, "does ye t'ink dat a gemmen like I am cares two wags of a sheep's tail w'at you'se got to say to dis hyer man? No, sah; an' I doesn't like you to asperse my character in dat air way."

And then, having thus relieved his mind the black marched off.

"That nig and I will have trouble one of these days!" Molly observed, sententiously.

"Oh, you must not mind him," Talbot said. "And now, Miss Molly, that I have a chance, allow me to thank you for the kindly warning you gave the other night. If you had not prepared me for the attack perhaps I might not have come off as well as I did."

"Don't say anything about that, stranger!" Molly exclaimed, a bright flush appearing on her cheeks, a fact that annoyed her, for she was fully conscious that the hot blood was flooding

her cheeks, although there was really no reason for it; and she knew, too, that curious eyes were watching her from the window where the two girls still were standing; the scrutiny did not please her, and yet she could not have very well told why. "It's my nature to speak right out and do what I think is right without asking anybody's advice. Mebbe it's bad that I am this way, but I cannot help it; it's my nature, and I never had anybody to teach me what to do; I grew up jest like any weed you know. I never had any edication; I ain't like them two fine ladies in there, but if I ain't got sich nice harness and fixings as them two has got on, I've got plenty of spunk and I'll stand up for my friends while the breath of life is in my body!" And when she made the declaration she cast a defiant glance at the two in the window, for, by some process of reasoning which it would have puzzled her to explain, Molly had come to the conclusion that the two ladies, whose manners and dress were so different from the average woman of the mining-camps, were no friends to her.

"Well, I'm much obliged for the service, and I sha'n't rest easy until I have a chance to square the debt," Talbot replied. His back being to the house, he had no idea that there were curious eyes observing the interview, and he was somewhat puzzled at the peculiar words and manner of the girl.

"Stranger, I took you to be a good square man, and I wasn't goin' to stand by and see you murdered in cold blood without taking a hand in the deal!" she declared emphatically; "and that is what brings me hyer to-day. Kanaka Bill, you know, has left town?"

"No, I didn't know it. I expected to meet him to-night; in fact, to own right up to the truth, I was going to cavort a little round the town so as to give the man a chance to settle his quarrel with me. You see, I hate to have these things on my mind," he added, with a coolness that was perfectly natural and not at all assumed. "If either of us is fated to have a funeral in this hyer Camp, why, the quicker it is decided which one of us is to do it, the better."

"Oh, he don't mean to fight you openly!" she exclaimed. "That isn't his game, at all. He tried his luck with you once in a fair fight, and he's satisfied. No; he means to lay in wait for you and shoot you from behind a house, like the coward that he is! That's all that I've got to say. I overheard enough this morning to know that your life was threatened, and I made up my mind to warn you, so-long! Mebbe this gay lady wouldn't do as much if she had the chance, for all her fine clothes!" And with a parting, contemptuous, defiant glance at the window, wherein the two girlish faces were framed, Molly hurried through the gate, leaving Talbot considerably astonished at her strange words.

And without the gate a surprise awaited Molly.

The tall, gaunt, white-faced, determined man accosted her.

"So, you have betrayed me again!" he cried; "you deserve to die!"

CHAPTER VIII.

A NEW FOE.

IT was quite plain that the man had been lying in wait for her, but the girl, although entirely taken by surprise, confronted him boldly.

This tall, gaunt man, small in flesh yet great in muscle, was one of the noted characters of Candle-box Camp.

Klamath John he was called, his right name had been forgotten if it had ever been known.

An odd, peculiar man was John; he had been one of the first pilgrims to find his way up the river after the Digger Indian had revealed the existence of the lode, and at first, like all the rest, he had staked out a claim and gone to work, but from the very beginning it was very evident that he was a much better card-player and hunter than a miner, and it wasn't very long before he gave up even the pretense of mining—for it had never been much else—and devoted himself exclusively to the two pursuits which were much more congenial to his nature.

The miners readily bought the game which he fetched into the camp, and paid a good price, too, for it was about the only fresh meat they ever got a chance at, and with this money and what he managed to pick up at gambling John was supposed to make about as good a thing of it as any miner in the Camp, and not work half as hard, either.

It was owing to his wild, hunting proclivities that the name of the river had been added to his Christian appellation; he was very cautious about revealing his hunting-grounds to any one and always said, "Up the Klamath," and on five or six occasions when he had brought fresh "dirt"—gold-dust—and small nuggets into the town to be changed, to the inquiries as to where he had procured the wealth, he had always given his old answer, "Up the Klamath," and so it happened that as Klamath John he was always known.

Silent, reserved and quiet as he generally was, yet when the occasion had come he had shown that in a row he was desperate, resolute and savage.

One little episode in the career of Klamath John since he took up his quarters in Candle-box Camp we have neglected to mention, and that was he had once been the superintendent of the Candle-box mine and had been poisoned by the secret foe, or foes, who seemingly had a grudge against all who were in any way connected with the mine.

"Yes," he repeated, angrily, "you have betrayed me for the second time and you deserve to die."

"Oh, but I won't die, at least not just now!" she replied, defiantly, and she thrust her hand into the pocket of the little, rough cloth sack that she wore.

"You foolish child, do you suppose that if I wished to kill you I would give you any chance at all, for your life?" he exclaimed, contemptuously. "You need not be alarmed; I shall not strike you except with words, but they will be pretty bitter ones. Are you going back to the saloon now?"

"Yes; but what is that to you?" asked Molly, her manner still defiant, and the very reverse of friendly.

"Why, I'll walk along with you and say what I've got to say."

"You needn't trouble yourself."

"Oh, but I must; I'm going to have a little explanation out of you, Miss Molly."

"You had better go about your own business and leave me to attend to mine," she responded, sharply, walking along toward her saloon as she spoke.

Klamath John kept right at her side.

"Oh, we must have an explanation—an understanding, in fact," he persisted. "I want to know now whether hereafter we are to meet as friends or foes."

"As neither," she retorted, "just mere acquaintances, that's all. When you come into my place you can pay for what you want; and when I buy your game I'll pay you your price."

"Mighty nice way to treat an old friend!" he exclaimed, contracting his bushy brows and evidently much annoyed.

"Oh, a great friend you've been to me!"

"Well, I have been a friend, and when you needed a friend, too," he replied, angrily, "but it's always the way with you women; there's no trusting any of you! The moment you saw this dandified chap you fell in love with him, heal over ears!"

"That's a lie!" cried the girl, fiercely, her face a flaming red. The speech was not a nice one, but Molly had been brought up in a rough school and she had never been taught to pick and choose her words.

"Oh, no, it ain't! It's the truth, sure enough! I'm no fool, and you can't pull the wool over my eyes. I noticed the look in your eyes when the fellow first entered the saloon. I was a-watching your face then, and when I saw your eyes flash as I had never seen them flash afore, I turned to see who it was that had come in and caused it. Then, when me and my partners were talking about laying the fellow out, I thought from the way you acted you were trying to overhear our words and so I kept my eyes on you. You didn't fool me a bit when you went over and spoke to him. I knew that you wasn't anxious about your money, but that you wanted to warn him that we were going for him."

"Well, I won't deny that I did warn him!" the girl cried, defiantly. "What of it? It was a cowardly thing, anyway, your game; I expected that all three of you were going to tackle him."

"So we ought to have done," the other replied, coolly, and just as unconcerned as though such an attack was a mere commonplace affair. "If Kanaka had not been so infernally headstrong, and so perfectly sure that he could make mince-meat out of the fellow, we could easily have finished him and fitted him for a coffin; but Bill insisted that he could handle the stranger, and so I let him have his own way, and the result was that he got badly beaten. I never saw a man whipped quicker or better in my life."

"What is the matter with you and this pilgrim, anyway?" demanded the girl, abruptly.

"That is none of your business."

"He doesn't seem to know you or any of your crowd!"

"We know him," Klamath retorted, significantly; "and we mean to settle up old grudges afore long. But I wanted to find out about you—I wanted to be certain that you had made up your mind to take the side of this stranger, rather than mine; that's the reason that Jockey Joe and I talked loud in your saloon this morning, just so that you could overhear our words. I wanted to see if you really had decided to go ag'in' me. I reckoned that if you had, you would be apt, after our loud talk, to think that we meant mischief right away, and would try to warn the stranger; so I watched you, and, sure enough, you came straight to the mine."

"Oh, you played the spy upon me, did you?" cried Molly, frightfully out of temper.

"Yes; I made up my mind that I would know the truth of the matter."

"Well, I hope that you are satisfied, now!" the girl exclaimed, with a bitter laugh. "But, I don't want you or anybody else to come spying round after me. I'm old enough to take keer of myself, and I have, so far, in this world, ever since I was big enough to know how. I don't ask no odds of you, nor of anybody else."

"You did ask odds of me, once, Molly," he answered, meaningly.

An angry look came over the girl's face; for a few moments she set her teeth tight together, breathed hard through them, and the angry reply came:

"No sich thing! I never did! I know what you mean; it was the hundred dollars that you lent me when my father died, and you advised me to open the Happy Palace! Oh, I knew what you was up to! You wanted to use me for a tool! You thought the Happy Palace was going to be your speculation—that I was a-going to run it and let you take all the profit. But, I knew a trick worth two of that. I took your money because I thought that I had a right to the loan of it, and I was sure that I could pay you back very soon. Many a dollar you won from my poor old drunken father at cards, and you cheated him, of course, for any sharp could cheat such a easy man as he was. You got your money back, and I owe you no thanks, either, for if you had let my old dad alone I would have had much more than a hundred dollars when he died. The miners passed around the hat and made up a 'stake' for me and that was given me out and out. So don't count that I owe you anything, because I don't!"

"Molly, are you in earnest to make an enemy of me?" Klamath John asked, his strange, white face growing even whiter, and an evil look shining out of his eyes.

"I don't care two cents whether you are a friend or an enemy!" the girl replied, proudly, with uplifted head. By this time the two were at the door of the Happy Palace.

"I'll make you care, though, maybe, before you are a month older!" the man exclaimed, threateningly.

"Oh, I don't fear you!" Molly retorted, instantly. "If it comes to trouble between us, I reckon that I've got as many friends in this hyer Camp as you have."

"And this stranger—how is he fixed, eh?"

"I reckon that he will be able to hold his ground against you, and all you can bring. He handled Kanaka as if he was a baby, last night, and I'll bet that Bill don't want any more of it in his'n!"

"He's handy enough with his fists, but we won't give him a chance to use them next time; and now I'll give you a bit of advice: Since you are struck after this stranger so badly, make much of him, for you won't have him hyer long; now just you remember what I say. We'll put him where the dogs won't trouble him!" And, with this threat, Klamath stalked away, leaving the girl in a very peculiar state of mind.

She was both angry and annoyed. Why should the man couple her and the stranger together? She had only done for him what she would have done for any one else in a like situation. What did she care for the man? She was no silly girl, to fall in love at first sight; the hard life, which had been her portion so far in this world, had pretty well destroyed all the romance that so naturally is a part of a maid's nature.

Love—bah! She laughed at the idea!

CHAPTER IX.

TUBBS FROM ARKANSAW.

THE girl entered the house and removed her hat, then, looking through the window, she caught sight of an odd-looking stranger approaching in the opposite direction from that in which the threatening hunter had gone.

The new-comer was a man a little below the medium height, very slender in figure, with particularly thin and oddly-shaped legs; he was dressed in a rusty black suit, very much the worse for wear, and it had evidently seen long service, for the coat and pantaloons were patched in twenty different places. The coat was buttoned tight in the neck, so that it was quite impossible to say whether the person had a shirt on underneath or not. He was not old, and yet "no chicken"; with a peculiar face, rather long, high cheek-bones and small, watery blue eyes; he wore his hair long, and, as it was quite thin, the black ringlets that came down over his coat-collar had an extremely corkscrew look; the hair was black, though, as the crow's wings, and evidently the source of considerable pride to its owner.

No such man had ever been seen in Candle-box Camp before, and, in fact, such a peculiar human was about as scarce in the usual Californian mining camp as an elephant, for the man was, seemingly, but little fitted to encounter the wild life common to the mountains and the foot-hills, for the face betrayed an easy, good-natured, irresolute ne'er-do-well, as plainly as the figure a lack of brawn and muscle.

In his hand the man carried an oddly-shaped

black box which looked strangely like a small coffin, but from the jaunty manner in which he advanced, his battered-up silk hat carefully tilted on one side in an extremely rakish style, it was quite plain that he was not on funeral thoughts intent.

As he approached, Molly came to the door, surveying him with as much curiosity as though he had been a wild beast; a smirking smile overspread his face, and when he came within a yard of her, he halted and indulged in a most elaborate bow—a bow that would have done honor to a French dancing-master.

"Have I the honor of addressing Miss Missouri, the proprietress of this stately mansion, that rears its cloud-capped towers high toward heaven?" exclaimed the little man, striking a position and waving his right hand wildly toward the sky.

Molly retreated a step; her first thought was that the man was crazy. The stranger noticed the motion and guessed the reason for it at once; it was not the first time such a thing had happened.

"Be not alarmed, fair maid!" he cried, if anything more extravagant in his manner than before; "no danger lurks within this manly frame!" and here he hit himself a sounding whack on the chest, that made the dust fly out of the dirty coat; "in me you behold a gentle, wandering stranger seeking

'Rest and shelter,
Food and fire!'

No thought of guile dwells within this bosom. Like the troubadours of old I journey afar,

'Strange countries for to see!'

I come to amuse—to instruct; to cause the gentle tear adown the cheek to glide, and anon to make the horny-handed son of toil to he-haw like a mu-ell with laughter. In brief, I am J. Lysander Tubbs, from Arkansaw!"

"I never heered on you," Molly replied, still regarding the man with suspicion.

"The more gracious, then, thy state perhaps!" answered the man, with another ridiculous bow, which annoyed the mistress of the Happy Palace exceedingly. She began to get an idea that the man was making fun of her.

"See hyer, stranger, I don't want no nonsense out of you, and I want you to understand it!" she warned him, angrily. "I don't want you to come talking any of your flummery round hyer; I don't keer 'bout any such nonsense!"

"My dear Miss Missouri, not for the world would I offend so sweet and gentle a hostess as yourself!" and Mr. Tubbs made another profound bow. "Surely never was great Jove himself served by a fairer Hebe than thou art!"

"Stranger, if you go to call me any names, I'll smack you, sure as shootin'!" exclaimed Molly, in a rage. "I ain't no sich thing as you called me, She-be or whatever it war."

"Ha, ha!" laughed the man, loudly, and then he suddenly changed his tone; "he, he!" he squeaked, and Molly stared in amazement.

"I see that you do not understand—permit me to explain; I am a professor of the art dramatique. I am Tubbs, the irresistible—Tubbs, the genial child of genius—Tubbs, the favorite son of Momus—Tubbs, the comedian, from Arkansaw!" and then the stranger banged his breast again, and glared up at the sky after the manner of Ajax defying the lightning.

Now this was all Greek to the girl, and so she shook her head, doubtfully.

"I don't know what you mean; are you a pasteboard sharp in hard luck?" she inquired. In truth the man did look something like a decayed gambler.

"Oh, no; that's not my leetle biz, though at a pinch, when dire necessity presses me close unto the wall, I kin flip the 'papers' with any hoss-thief in the camp. But that, my divine Miss Molly, is not my regular lay; I am a follower of gentle William, Avon's hard—an advance guard of the drama—a picket, a scout thrown out, fresh fields to conquer and new laurels to win; so carry the news to Mary, that I am come! Just look over that, will you?"

The man had such a peculiar way of dropping from the sublime into the commonplace that it was really quite startling.

Mr. Tubbs at the finish of his speech drew from one of his pockets a small hand-bill which he opened with a great flourish, but, as he was about to give it to the girl an idea occurred to him.

"I beg your pardon—but of course you can read?"

"Read!" cried Molly, in the utmost disdain: "what do you take me for?"

"My brains are wool-gathering, of course!" he replied, slapping his forehead in an extremely energetic manner. "Forgive the apparent slight; attribute it to a mind disordered by incessant toil o'er the works of sages by

'The dim, religious light of the fitful kerosene.'

"He's cracked, sure!" Molly muttered, as she glanced at the hand-bill which he gave to her. It was a fearful and wonderful production, that read as follows:

THEATER ROYAL,
YREKA.

NOTE. The Theater Royal on this occasion will be in the large hall over Joe Smith's store, where can be found the best assortment of goods at popular live and let live prices, north of Frisco.

Come one, call all
And give me a call;
Joe Smith will suit you all,
And treat you besides to a 'ball.'

N. B. The best whisky in town—warranted pure bug-juice and no water.

"I had to put that in," interrupted the comedian at this point, "for Smith was a man with no soul and wanted to charge me five dollars for the use of the room, but I fixed him off with that; the poetry caught him heavy, you know, and the 'ball' did the boys, too; for to take a 'ball' is to have a drink, you know. You can't imagine how it runs Smith's business up."

Molly nodded and proceeded:

The eminent son of genius—the rising star that from the broad plains of the South-west has emerged to astonish all the world—the gifted son of Momus, whose performances for 100 nights at the Drury Lane Theater, London, England, were witnessed, and applauded to the echo, which did applaud again, by all the crowned heads of Europe—the world-famous, world-conquering

J. LYSANDER TUBBS,

THE ARKANSAW COMEDIAN.

In his wonderful performance entitled

LAUGH AND BE HAPPY.

PROGRAMME.

SCENE FROM HAMLET.

HAMLET.....Mr. J. LYSANDER TUBBS
GHOST.....Mr. J. L. TUBBS.
THE QUEEN MOTHER.....Mr. TUBBS.

TRICK VIOLIN SOLO:

IMITATIONS OF BIRDS AND ANIMALS.

VIOLINIST.....Mr. J. L. TUBBS.

RECITATION:

THE FRENCHMAN AND THE RATS.

FRENCHMAN.....Mr. JACK L. TUBBS.
THE RATS.....Mr. JACKY LYSANDER TUBBS.

VIOLIN SOLO:

THE CARNIVAL OF VENICE. OLE BULL.

OLE BULL.....Mr. TUBBS.

MOVING TABLEAU:

EDGAR A POE'S RAVEN.

EDGAR A. POE.....Mr. TUBBS.
THE RAVEN.....Mr. TUBBS.
LOST LENORE.....Mr. TUBBS.
NEVERMORE.....Mr. TUBBS.

To conclude with the great quarrel scene from Shakspeare's masterpiece,

JULIUS CÆSAR.

CASSIUS.....Mr. TUBBS.
BRUTUS.....Mr. TUBBS.
MARK ANTONY.....Mr. TUBBS.
THE GHOST FROM PHILIPPI.....Mr. TUBBS.

CARDS OF ADMISSION.....4 BITS.

N. B. No produce taken at the door, but Mr. Joe Smith will be happy to negotiate down-stairs in the store; highest prices always paid.

"Oh, I see, it's a show," Molly observed, after she had finished the perusal of the bill wherein, by means of a little juggling with words, a single man managed to give the impression that there was going to be a "heap" of an entertainment.

"Exactly."

"And you are going to give it hyer?"

"Precisely."

"It won't pay; I don't believe that ten people will come."

"Ten! ye gods and little fishes! I only had five in Yreka! Ten! If they give ten ducats into this manly hand then will I rise up and call this Camp blessed!" he cried, in the theatrical style that had become a second nature to him.

"Well, I'll help you all I can."

"Gentle mistress, 'your pains are written where every day I turn the page to read them;' and, by the way, that reminds me, did you ever hear of a man called Dick Talbot?"

CHAPTER X.

THE ENTERTAINMENT.

"DICK TALBOT?" said the girl, looking rather astonished at the question; "yes, I believe that is his name," and a slight flush came up in her cheeks as she spoke.

"Oh, certainly, I know that it is his name; there ain't any doubt about that; but the question is to find the man to strip the lamb's skin from him that he wears and hold him forth to all the world, the moral monster that he is!"

"Why, he don't wear any lamb's skin. I reckon that lambs, or sheep, or any sich thing are mighty sceerce up in this hyer region; and, as to being a monster, he's jest as nice and squar' a man as ever struck this camp!"

"Aha! he's here, then? Oh, by high heaven, I'll clutch my leetle game! The stake is mine;

the prize, your head, so much for me lord cardinal! But, is he here in his own proper person? Surely he does not dare to let the gaping world stare on and know that he is Dick Talbot—Talbot of Cinnabar!"

"Certainly; that's what he calls himself."

"Well, hang me if the man hasn't got cheek enough to be president of a railroad!" Tubbs protested, evidently astonished. "But, come to think of it, and the idea did not occur to me before, I presume that the people of this Camp don't know much about my esteemed friend, Richard Talbot, esquire, erst of Cinnabar."

"No, not much; he's a stranger hyer."

"That accounts for it; my leetle game will work then."

"Are you a friend of this hyer Talbot?"

"In strict confidence, Miss Missouri, I will confide the fact to you that I never saw him in the whole course of my life; but, question me no more. I could a tale unfold that would harrow up thy young soul and cause each particular hair to stand on end like squills upon the frightful porcupine—"

"Stranger, you have got more gab—more foolish gab than any man I ever see'd!" and Molly's face expressed the disgust she felt.

Mr. Tubbs laughed; he seemed to think that the remark was a compliment.

"Ah! you are a true child of nature—a daughter of these wild scenes o'ershadowed by the cloud-capped peaks where the free eagle sails on majestic wing and screams unto its mate."

"Do shut up; you make me sick!" the girl cried, indignantly.

Even the irrepressible Mr. Tubbs could not take this remark as a compliment, although it was extremely hard to dash his ever exuberant spirits.

"Talbot I will leave as a last resource," he observed; "heaven knows, I don't want to be hard on the poor fellow if he is getting along and making his way in the world. But, if the worst comes to the worst—if the inhabitants of this romantic and salubrious spot are deaf to the charms of poetry, and turn their back upon the dulcet strains of my violin here—why, then, I must 'go for' Talbot—bold Talbot of Cinnabar."

"Oh, is it a fiddle that you've got in that?" exclaimed Molly, really relieved; "blessed! if I didn't think that it was a coffin!"

Tubbs made a wry face and looked at the box ruefully for a moment.

"The sad remains of beauty once admired," he remarked, poetically; "but what is the odds as long as you're happy? You are quite right, Miss Missouri; it is more like a coffin than a violin-box, but it serves my purpose. Have you knowledge of a room that will do for my entertainment within the limits of this Camp of Candle-box?"

"To give a show in?"

"Exactly."

"Well, my saloon is the only room that is of any size in the Camp."

"The very thing—and the entertainment will be a big thing for your bar, too; remember that, Miss Missouri! I'll pitch it to 'em strong so that they'll want to take a drink after every act. I'll divide the whole thing into acts so as to fix the bar trade all right."

"Scene from Hamlet. Hamlet, Mr. J. Lysander Tubbs. Ghost, Mr. Jack L. Tubbs. The Queen Mother, Mr. Tubbs. Intermission of five minutes. Liquid refreshment, pure as honey-dew and sparkling as the leaping mountain brook, may be had at the well-stocked bar of the Happy Palace, Miss Missouri's world-famous saloon, the finest north of Frisco, at reasonable prices."

"See! that will catch the boys, heavy! You better have a fresh supply of the ardent put in!" He had written out this new departure on the programme with the point of his finger. "Or, by the way!" he exclaimed, as a new idea came to him, "you need not do that; just water what you've got on hand, add a little red pepper to make it bite, and I'll work 'em up so strong with the poetry and the music that they will never know the difference. Now, don't stick on too steep a rent; and I'll stop at your house, too, and that will help the bar-trade. After the entertainment, you know, I shall be the lion of the Camp—the distinguished guest, you see! Every man that's introduced to me will ask me to drink; of course I'll return the compliment; then he'll have to set 'em again, certainly! You can fix a private bottle for me, water with just a dash of whisky in it. Why, Miss Missouri, I ought to be good for a hundred drinks a day. One hundred drinks, two bits a-head, twenty-five dollars—and there ought to be twenty dollars profit on that."

"If you stay long enough in this hyer Camp you'll get hung!" Molly exclaimed, in a compassionate sort of way.

"Oh, don't you worry about that. I've been round with the boys afore now; I know exactly how to take 'em; I'm a big favorite among 'em, I tell you!" Mr. Tubbs assured. "But, touching this leetle rent biz—put it on light now, because this is not a very large Camp, and, maybe, the boys ain't over-flush with their money."

"Well, times ain't over and above good."

"That is exactly what I thought; but I've

more than one string to my bow, you know; the entertainment biz pays pretty well sometimes, but in some camps it ain't worth a cent, and where it don't pan out well I fall back on clairvoyance."

"Eh?" and Molly looked inquisitively at him. She hadn't the remotest idea of what he meant.

"Don't understand that? a trifle too much for you, eh? Oh, well, one can't be expected to know everything. Clairvoyance, my dear Miss Missouri, is the biggest thing out; it beats 'em all. Clairvoyance is when a party goes to sleep and in the sleep tells fortunes."

"It can't be done!" the girl declared, incredulously.

"Oh, yes, it can! I'm just the toughest old clairvoyant that ever was seen! 'to sleep—perchance to dream, ah! there's the rub!' All I want is a five-dollar gold piece put in my hand for me eyes to gaze on, and then I can go to sleep immediately and when I get to sleep I tell the most beautiful fortunes. It's rather unpleasant business sometimes, though. I was 'strapped' down at Yreka—that is, broke, financially speaking; and I just rushed around the town to see if I could hunt up somebody that desired a peep into futurity."

"Tell me, ye black and midnight hags, what is it ye do?"

"I struck an angel at last—a big six-footer, a mule-skinner just in from the Oregon trail. He wanted his fortune told but two bits was all he was willing to pay. Oppressed as I was at that time, by the unrelenting hand of iron fortune, I was really glad to scoop in his paltry silver piece. I went into the clairvoyant state and I made up my mind that the big brute should have a good two bits' worth, so I told him that his life of crime and rapine would soon come to an end—that if he tarried within the walls of Yreka for four and twenty hours an enraged vigilance committee would rise in its might, seize him, tar and feather him, ride him out of town on a rail and then, when he got back to his own corral, his mu ells, not recognizing him in his strange disguise, would instantly kick him to death! But I piled it on a leetle too strong; the tar and feather business he didn't mind. I presume that he had been run out of so many towns that he had got used to it, but the idea of his own mules kicking him, that was too much, and, despite the fact that I was in a clairvoyant state, and of course was not responsible for the working of the oracle, he went for me, bald-headed, and it took four men to pull him off. I never came so near getting killed before, in all my life. Then the next customer was another two-bit fellow, and I made up my mind that I wasn't going to risk my life a second time, so I reeled it off splendidly for him. I told him that 'the stars predicted a long life and wealth untold; he would go into politics, run for Congress and get elected;' and, just then, he 'went' for me. He said that any man that insinuated that he was going to disgrace his family by saying that he was going to be a Congressman had got to die right on the spot. It took six men to pull him off, and I haven't tried clairvoyance since; still, if bad fortune comes—'dashes on the breaking rocks my weary, sea-sick bark,' why, then, needs must when Old Nick drives!"

Molly had taken quite an interest in the stranger, he seemed such a simple, happy-go-lucky sort of fellow; so she told him that he was welcome to the use of the room, and that after his show was over if he wished to entertain the "boys" with a tune or two in the evening, in consideration of the service, she wouldn't charge him any board.

Mr. Tubbs was profuse in his thanks, and Molly, conducting him into the house, set out a hearty meal, to which he did full justice. As he told the mistress of the Happy Palace, he had walked all the way from Yreka and subsisted on a couple of crackers.

Such are the ups and downs of the children of genius!

Tubbs went at once to work to prepare for his entertainment. He procured a paint-brush and lettered some bills which he stuck up around town; then he called personally on everybody that lived within a couple of miles of the Happy Palace, and solicited their patronage.

And so, in a very short time, the Arkansaw Comedian, as he delighted to term himself, became on the best of terms with almost everybody in the Camp.

The night of the entertainment came, and about twenty-five people passed by Molly, who stood at the door, and deposited a dollar in her hands, much to her astonishment, for she had not believed that any one would come. Quite a number had attended out of curiosity—the General, for instance, accompanied by the two girls and Talbot; but quite a large party of the boys had come for the express purpose of having some "fun" with the crazy loon, as they considered Mr. Tubbs, and they had provided themselves with sundry articles which were destined to be brought into active use, but they were somewhat disconcerted upon discovering that the two ladies were present.

CHAPTER XI.

MR. TUBBS RECITES.

THE "boys" held council together and discussed what they should do, for the presence of the two girls rather interfered with their plans.

But, as we have said, the majority of the folks of Candle-box Camp were a rough set, and as they had made up their minds to have some fun at the expense of the showman—the crazy fool, as they termed him—they resolved to go ahead, thinking that the moment the "fun" commenced the women-folks would take the hint and get out.

This promised to be an eventful evening for the Camp at Candle-box, for, just as the comedian was getting ready to go ahead with his performance, the silent and moody hunter, Klamath John, accompanied by Kanaka Bill and Jockey Joe, entered the room.

The moment they paid their money and passed by Molly, she made up her mind at any risk to warn Talbot that his enemies had arrived.

But upon glancing around, she found that Talbot was already conscious of the fact.

Injun Dick, as he used to be called in the old time, was altogether too well versed in mining camp difficulties to allow himself to be taken at a disadvantage, and knowing that war had been declared between himself and Kanaka Bill, and that it was "shoot" on sight, he had taken particular pains upon entering the saloon, where it was probable that his foe would come during the evening, to select a position that both defied a surprise and commanded a full view of all that was going on within the saloon.

He had placed himself by a window on the left hand side of the room, taking the precaution to close the shutters, and with his back to the wall could easily see everybody that came in.

The entrance of the three men excited general remark among those present. All knew there had been a quarrel between Talbot and Kanaka, and there was a great probability that the quarrel would have a bloody ending on the very first occasion the two men came together.

And now, here they were, both in the same room, and both armed of course—"heeled," ready for the fight.

But, to the surprise of all, Kanaka did not seem to perceive his foe, for, with his companions he took a seat quite close to the door.

"Don't you see the dodge?" quoth one miner to another; "he's goin' to wait till the show is out, then, when Talbot moves to leave, he'll try for to get the 'drop' on him."

"A dollar fur the show an' the shootin'-match throwed in," observed the other.

Two tables had been placed together at the further end of the room to serve as a platform, and a blanket hung from a pole nailed to the side of one of the tables and extending to the wall, formed a retiring room for the performer.

Promptly at the appointed time, Mr. Tubbs appeared from behind the blanket, and mounting the rude platform, made his bow to the audience and commenced his performance.

Mr. Tubbs was truly a natural-born comedian, if his rendition of the "Scene from Hamlet" was any criterion to go by, for it was most ridiculously funny, but the joke of the thing was that the actor was thoroughly in earnest, and was trying with all his power to do due justice to the tragic theme.

In truth, the "child of genius" was but a sorry performer, and when he essayed the violin solo, such fearful discord was never heard before.

Of course the applause was deafening; no matter what Mr. Tubbs did the audience applauded vigorously; if he stopped for a moment to take breath the jokers howled at the top of their lungs, and stamped with their big boots violently enough to bring down a less well-constructed shanty.

But, some of the miners were very rough fellows, and they were not content to enjoy the fun in a half-boisterous sort of way; so they began to make a most frightful noise, yelling like a lot of wild Indians, so that it was impossible for Tubbs to go on.

Talbot set his teeth firmly together when the noise commenced, and was on his feet in an instant, but Desdemona was watching him, and she laid her hand entreatingly upon his arm, and he, understanding what she meant, sat down.

"For my sake, Mr. Talbot, don't get into any disturbance!" she said, earnestly. "They will soon get tired and stop."

"You don't know these hounds as well as I do, miss," he replied. "This is but the beginning. I had an idea when some of them came in that they meant mischief, but I thought when they saw there were ladies present they would have respect enough for them to keep quiet. They need a lesson, miss, they need a lesson in this Camp, and I think, maybe, I could give them one."

The big veins were standing out on Talbot's forehead in a peculiar way, although this sign of excitement apart, he was apparently as cool and collected as a man of ice.

The noise continued, and the comedian was forced to pause and implore peace. He was now in the midst of "the Frenchman and the Rats," but he might as well have been engaged in reciting in the Choctaw tongue for all the audience understood of what he said.

"Gentlemen, if you don't keep quiet I can't go on!" he shouted.

Tubbs was very pale; he was used to scenes something like this, although not quite so bad. He didn't mind being laughed at as long as the audience paid their money. As he was wont to remark in his cups, "I play the fool on the stage, perhaps, but I get paid for it; the audience play the fool in front and they pay for the pleasure of so doing," but his quick eyes had discerned that some of the rough fellows had things in their hands, and he was terribly afraid that they intended to throw some missiles at him.

"Oh, go on!" cried one.

"It's bully!" sung out a second.

"First rate!" added a third.

Then the general cry came: "Go on! go on!"

Thus commanded the comedian obeyed, but he had hardly spoken ten words when a well-aimed potato came whizzing by his head, and striking the wall behind, smashed into a dozen pieces.

As there were no eggs to be had in the Camp, either good, bad, or indifferent, the gang was obliged to content themselves with potatoes.

The tuber was a big one, and being thrown with great force most certainly would have floored the comedian if it had struck him.

Talbot could restrain himself no longer.

"Miss Skeppleton!" he cried, earnestly to her, as the audience were roaring over the well-aimed shot, "don't you see now that I must speak? I know these fellows better than you do. I have lived among them for years, and the only thing in the world they respect is the hand of a master. If I don't interfere the chances are that they will half-kill this poor fellow before they get through with him."

"But, they may kill you!" she cried, her face deadly pale.

"What is my life worth anyway? That's a riddle that I have been trying to solve for a good many years, and I haven't guessed it yet." And then with his hand thrust into the right hand pocket of the loose sack-coat he wore he rose to his feet.

Apparently it was a careless movement, for he displayed no weapon, but the pocket was a dummy one, as was also its mate on the other side; it was only a slit in the coat with a flap inside to look like a pocket; the hands passed right through and grasped the heavy revolvers swung in a holster from the waist.

The shouting had given place to roars of laughter. The same big, rough-bearded, ugly fellow who had thrown the potato now held a second one in his hand, and was taking deliberate aim at the miserable Mr. Tubbs on the stage, who was eagerly begging the man to refrain from throwing and was dancing about from side to side, ready to dodge the missile when it did come, as he fully expected it would.

Talbot's voice rung out clear and shrill.

"Say, you fellow with the big beard, ain't you forgetting that there are ladies in the room?"

The laughter hushed on the instant, and every eye in the apartment was instantly fixed upon the speaker.

"Perhaps you are not aware that there are a couple of ladies here," Talbot continued, "and they won't have a very good opinion of the men of Candle-box, if this sort of thing continues."

"Yes, gentlemen, you ought not to act this way!" Tubbs cried, glad of a chance to get in a word. "I don't mind what you say, but I don't like it when you throw things, and if that potato had hit me, it would have served me as the old song says:

"A kidney 'tater, such a size,
Tuck Paddy Flynn atune the eyes,
And sint him rollin into the styes,
At the wake of Teddy, the tyler!"

A roar of laughter greeted this effusion, and one of the gang took advantage of the occasion to shout out, as the laughter died away:

"Let the ladies go home."

"And why should they go home?" demanded Talbot, instantly. "So that you can make brutes of yourselves? Let the man go on; you are all getting your money's worth, and there's not a single one of you has any right to complain. If you don't like it, go out and go home, but while you remain behave like decent white men, and don't forget that there are ladies present."

Now, the rough fellows didn't like to be talked to in this way; it went "against their grain," most decidedly; and, although from the taste they had had of the stranger's quality on the previous evening, the idea prevailed that the new man of the Candle-box mine was going to be a hard nut for any of them to crack, yet, as he stood there leaning against the wall, with his hands in his pockets, he didn't seem to be very dangerous.

The big-bearded fellow, who was one of the toughest customers in the Camp, was resolved not to be dictated to in this way.

CHAPTER XII.

ONE-MAN POWER.

"Who in thunder air you, anyway, and who made you boss over this hyer Camp?" the big loafer demanded. "If the ladies don't like our fun, why, let 'em go home; that's all fair an' squar', ain't it, fellow-citizens? We ain't a-keeping 'em hyer. We'll keep jest as quiet as mice until they go out. We came hyer to have some fun; we paid a dollar fur it, and we're going to have it, or else there'll be a row!"

"But, gentlemen, allow me to say that what may be fun to you is death to me," Tubbs protested, vigorously.

"Perhaps we had better retire," said the general, rising.

"You will come with us, Mr. Talbot?" the general's daughter said.

"No, miss; I can't go," he replied, firmly. "I've undertaken to see this man through, and when I put my hand to the wheel I never turn back."

The girl hesitated for a moment and then she laid her hand upon the arm of her father.

"Let us stay, father," she said; "it is our duty to support Mr. Talbot by our presence in this affair."

"Yes; oh, do stay, general!" the young lady from Angels exclaimed. "My pa always said that you mustn't give way to such fellows, or else they would ride right over you."

"Well, well; perhaps it might be better to settle it now as at some other time," the old gentleman concluded, and he sat down.

General Skeppleton had lived some fifty years in this world, and in that time naturally he had seen something of life; he flattered himself that he knew a good deal of mankind. He had heard many blustering words spoken and weighty threats made and yet had never witnessed an actual fight. The combatants had either gone off of their own accord, or else friends had stepped in and separated them.

But the mine owner knew not the men of the wild West—the men of the camps on the frontiers of civilization, where nearly every second person you meet is one who has left his country for his country's good. With such, a personal quarrel generally ends in a personal encounter. If friends interfere it is to secure fair play—to see that their "pardner" is not pitted against unequal odds. For a man to back out of a fight is to imply that he is a coward. Such a man fails to win the respect and esteem of his fellows.

Even to this day the laws of the duello are in as full force in the country of which we write as ever they were in old-time France, where a gallant was not accounted much if he had not "killed his man."

The general sat down; he reckoned that it wasn't going to be much of a disturbance, after all. He had seen how skillfully Talbot had disposed of the other fellow, and he had no doubt whatever that he would be able to give a good account of this one.

This little episode in the proceedings rather inspired the big fellow of the beard with a fresh degree of courage. By the general's manner he thought he perceived a lack of purpose in the enemy's camp, and he was quick to improve the supposed advantage that he had gained.

"Oh, you had better not sit down, old gent!" he suggested. "Git right up and vamose the ranch, and take your gals with you, too; and we kin spare this young feller that is so pert with his gab. I want you to understand that we are all free and equal in this hyer country, and nary man is two cents better nor another, even if he does own a mine with a mill onto it. You can't walk over us in this hyer town if we do use the rocker and the Long Tom, and we don't want no galoot to come into this hyer Camp and put on any frills; and if any pilgrim does, why, I'm jest the boy to take the starch out of his shirt, and I don't keer a darn whether it's buckskin, woolen or b'iled!"

"You're an ugly-mouthed ruffian, and if you don't drop that potato I'll shoot it out of your hand!" Talbot cried, and with the word his silver-mounted six-shooter flashed in the light, though how he got it, or where it came from, no one could tell, for so quick was the movement that the pistol was out before any one within the room had the slightest suspicion that such a thing was intended.

Talbot had gained a most decided advantage, for with his cocked and leveled revolver he threatened the life of his antagonist.

The big fellow blinked and winked as he gazed at the shining tube of the pistol, leveled directly at him, like an owl brought suddenly from darkness into the light.

For a few moments he was speechless, so utterly taken by surprise was he by Talbot's skillful movement.

"Blazes!" he growled at last, "ain't you going to give me any show at all for my money? Say, boys, is this hyer the clean white thing?" he continued, appealing to the crowd.

"Gentlemen!" cried Talbot, before any one in the room could speak in answer to his appeal, "this man, even if he had his revolver out and cocked, don't stand any mere show with me than if he was a child six years old. See!"

And then, before any one within the apartment had time to divine his intent, or lift finger to prevent it, Talbot pulled the trigger of the revolver.

The bullet sped on its way, and striking the potato full in the center, as the ruffian held it with outstretched fingers high in the air ready to throw at the comedian, split it in twain, knocking it clean from the gripe of the holder.

It was just as if the potato had suddenly become red-hot and burnt the fingers of the bully.

He was terribly alarmed; the shock was so great that he thought all his fingers were gone, and therefore howled at the top of his voice.

"Shut up, you fool!" warned Talbot, contemptuously. "You are not hurt, although I could just as easily have put a bullet through your thick head."

For a moment there was dead silence in the room; all were marveling at the splendid shot, and wondering what manner of man was this stranger who had come among them.

Talbot was the first to break the silence.

"Sit down, you big lubber!" he cried—"that is, unless you are not satisfied and want another dose."

The man sat down; for the moment he was awed into obedience.

"Now then, Mr. Tubbs, if you will have the kindness to go on I will see that you are not interrupted again. I mean just what I say, gentlemen," he said, addressing the audience. "There's going to be order in this hyer concert if I have to kill a dozen of you. The first pilgrim that hoots, or howls, or throws anything, I'll bore a hole through quicker'n a wink. It's business, boys, with me now, every time, and if you don't believe it, just some of you try it on. Go ahead, Mr. Tubbs!"

It was really a marvelous sight; twenty stout, well-armed, reckless men—the very handogs of society, nearly all of whom could boast of having had "a man for breakfast" some time in their lives, cowed by a single resolute, determined person.

But there was "fight" in Dick Talbot's face, there was "shoot" plainly to be read in the steely glitter of his dark eyes.

If there was any one in that room anxious to "pass in his chips" and get his baggage checked for the happy hunting-grounds, now was the chance, and every man-Jack of them felt that it was so.

Never did a man stand out more prominently a hero than Dick Talbot while the comedian hurried through his performance.

The conscience of Tubbs smote him; here was the man standing forward in his defense—a single person against a crowd—whom he had remorselessly pursued for the purpose of making a "stake" out of, to use the mining vernacular.

It is quite safe to say that neither the audience nor the performer enjoyed the entertainment much, for all within the room were busily engaged in thinking of what was to come.

Talbot already had one quarrel on his hands, and now he had boldly entered into another.

The performance came to an end at last, and a sorry performance it was, too, for poor Tubbs was too agitated to be extravagant, and the miners were too much afraid of Talbot's pistol to indulge in any merriment whatever for fear that honest mirth might be mistaken for unseemly mockery.

Tubbs closed the entertainment by returning thanks for the liberal patronage which he had received—and the earnest attention with which his efforts were greeted, he was about to say, as was customary with him, but on the present occasion he concluded that he had better omit that part; so he bowed himself behind the blanket, and there, in dread, waited for the pistol-shots which would announce the beginning of the fray that he felt sure must soon come.

Already, like a prudent general, the comedian had selected a line of retreat. He had made up his mind upon the first sign of hostilities to take refuge under the tables and by upsetting the rear one form a barricade which would be proof against stray bullets.

During the performance the friends of the big fellow, who were clustered around, had been advising him how to proceed. There are always plenty of men ready to give advice to another about how to conduct a quarrel, although not quite so ready to enter into one themselves.

"It was just a lucky hit," they argued. "He couldn't hit that potato again in a dozen trials."

And the big ruffian, who was terribly mortified by his discomfiture, and rather ashamed that he had been backed down so easily, began to believe that it was only chance, after all, and that Talbot could not repeat the skillful shot.

Klamath John, too, and his two "pardners" in the rear of the room, were preparing for action, for it was their intention to attack Talbot when the company separated.

Altogether there were good prospects for a lively time ahead.

CHAPTER XIII.

A DARING CHALLENGE.

TALBOT seemed to comprehend the purpose of his foes as well as if he really possessed the gift of clairvoyance, to which the comedian, Tubbs, pretended. The years that he had passed in the wild West, and the life of toil and danger he had led, had not been wasted, nor its lessons lost.

He understood that, with the breaking up of the party, he was pretty certain to be attacked, not only by the big rough, but by the three men in the rear of the saloon. His quick eyes long ago had detected Kanaka Bill and his two companions, and he rightly guessed that all three traveled together.

"General, and you, too, ladies, will you have the kindness to excuse me after the performance is ended?" he asked, while the comedian was delivering his last recitation. "I may have to leave you quite abruptly."

"There is danger, then, Mr. Talbot? You fear an attack?" Desdemona inquired, anxiety on her sweet face and a tremor in her tones.

"Oh, I am not sure of it, you know; but then, it is always best for a man to be on his guard."

"Mr. Talbot, cannot we stay and be of service to you?" and if the words were spoken in a low voice, there was a strong purpose in the flash of her eye.

"Oh, no, miss, not in the least—thanking you kindly for the offer, all the same, though."

"Dessi, dear," as the gushing young creature from Angels generally addressed her companion, "Mr. Talbot is quite right. I've often heard my pa say that when there was going to be a fight, women were always in the way, and hurt their friends a great deal more than they helped them; but, Mr. Talbot, don't let that comical fellow get hurt if you can help it; he's just as funny as a monkey."

The comedian would not have been pleased at this remark.

"He's in no danger, miss."

"But you are, Mr. Talbot?" Desdemona said, earnestly.

"Oh, nothing to hurt," he assured, carelessly.

"I guess Mr. Talbot is right, dear," the old general declared, in his placid way. "He has taken the measure of these fellows, and understands them pretty well."

"Depart the moment the performance ends," Talbot said to the group; "that is the only way in which you can serve me."

They complied with the request, although Desdemona evidently went most unwillingly. It was repugnant to her nature to leave Talbot alone in the presence of his enemies, for, to her mind, each and every man in the room was a deadly foe to the mine's superintendent.

Not a soul stirred within the room while the ladies were passing out.

In fact, quite a number of the audience felt that they were in an extremely awkward situation, and were wondering how on earth they were going to get out without suffering personal damage.

Talbot was at one corner of the apartment, the big-bearded rough about in the center of the apartment, but on the opposite side and near the wall, while Klamath John and his men were 'way back by the door that led into the open air.

Now, the question that troubled the audience was, if the hostile parties suddenly opened fire, who was most likely to get hit, the parties themselves, or the innocent spectators who were wedged in the center of the triangle formed by the three? Therefore, all sat still as mice and looked at each other. No one wanted to get up, for the commencement of a movement might be the signal for the fight to begin, and those who were on their feet would be pretty apt to stop some of the flying balls.

In the street or saloon affray, in nine cases out of ten, it is the bystanders that suffer, and not the principals.

Talbot solved the riddle for the anxious spectators.

"Now, then, gentlemen, as I reckon there are two parties in this hyer room who are anxious to drive a nail in my coffin, and as I am naturally the most obliging fellow in the world, I'm going to give them a chance," he said, deliberately. "I don't ask any odds of any one man in this Camp, nor of any ten! If I tread on anybody's toes in my passage through this vale of tears, I am always ready to step up to the captain's office and settle. But, there's a good many in this room that I haven't got any grudge against, and I guess they haven't got any against me. I should feel real sorry if I should make a mistake and 'plug' one of my fellow-citizens who never did anything to me."

At this point the men who were between the contending parties began to move restlessly upon their seats; they sympathized with the speaker, fully; he couldn't be any sorrier for "plugging" them than they would be to be "plugged."

"Now, fellow citizens, this is what I propose," Talbot continued; "let us adjourn this thing to the open air. I've got a window here handy and can step right out; my gentle friends who are hungering for my scalp can go out

through the door. I'll take up a position right in the center of the street and there I will be ready to meet any one, two, three or ten men, in this hyer town, who are hungering for my corpus, if there be that many, and ask no odds from any of them. I don't call on them to come up singly, but to come up all at once, or any way it pleases them. I can't say any fairer!"

"You want a chance to cut and run!" cried the stern voice of Klamath John.

"You are a liar, and not an ounce of man in you!" responded Talbot, loudly, "and I reckon that you'd better take a hand in this fight; the more the merrier. I want to settle this thing right up at once. I don't want to fight the whole town in detail. I want to wipe you all out at once or get wiped out, and that is the kind of man I am!"

Never since the day when the first miner struck his pick into the earth of Candle-box Camp had its denizens ever listened to such an astounding proposition.

Either the man was crazy or else he was made of sterner stuff than the usual pilgrims who had wound their devious way up along the Klamath river.

But that the man was in sober earnest there was very little doubt. After such a challenge he must back it up or else never hold up his head as a fighting-man in the Camp of Candle-box again.

At this juncture up rose an old and bearded man—Judge Zebulon Gobble, the principal storekeeper—in fact, the only storekeeper of the Camp. Gobble was one of the solid citizens of the place, and a man well liked by all.

"Pears to me," he remarked, "that wot Mister Talbot says is 'bout the squar' thing. I ain't anxious to stop a bullet, and I reckon thar's a big chance of it if the fite is pitched in to hyer. I'll count one, two, three, then all you fittin'-men git!"

"One, two, three, go!"

Lightly as a dancing-master Talbot leaped through the window, first pushing the shutter open. He then went at once to the middle of the street and taking up his position, a revolver in each hand, waited for the onset.

The miners came pouring out of the saloon, all eager to see the fun, but one and all were careful to get at a safe distance so as to be out of range.

It was truly comical to see the bearded heads peeping out from behind the corners of the shanties, and one rather fat fellow had squeezed down behind a small dry-goods box that stood in front of the judge's store and was now anxiously engaged in calculating whether the box was big enough to shelter him or not.

There was a new moon; it was quite bright, and high in the heavens, so that there was plenty of light for the affair.

All within the saloon had come out into the street, with the exception of the girl, Missouri. She had hurried up-stairs and throwing open one of the front windows appeared at the casement, thus having a full view of the battle-ground.

She knelt at the window so that only her head and shoulders were visible, but there was a purpose in the attitude, for in her hands she grasped a pair of revolvers, and she was used to handling them, too; for report gave out that she was as good a shot as any man up along the river.

If Talbot was to fall by the hands of his foes, the desperate young woman had made up her mind that he should have company on the dark way.

And as the girl, with a moody brow and compressed lips, looked forth into the darkness of the night, she detected a group of figures half concealed behind a shanty, only a short distance from what was to be the battle-ground.

Molly had eyes like a hawk, and at the first glance she recognized the people who composed the group.

The general and his party had not gone home. His daughter had quitted the saloon very unwillingly, and when she was in the open air she flatly refused to return to the mine without Talbot.

"Father, it is downright cruel," she exclaimed, warmly, "for us to go away and leave Mr. Talbot here in the hands of his enemies! If we cannot help him in his battle we can at least aid him if he is hurt in the contest."

The young lady from Angels also protested against going away, and so the whole party staid.

"Now, then, gentlemen, I'm waiting on you!" Talbot exclaimed, impatient for the work to begin. "Come, cry havoc and let slip the dogs of war! How many are there of you?"

In answer to the question the big-bearded bully stepped forward, a revolver in each hand. Then, from another quarter, appeared Kanaka Bill, similarly armed.

"Two!" muttered the crowd, who were peering out anxiously at the scene.

But there were more than two, for Klamath John and Jockey Joe followed Bill.

Four good men to fight bold Richard Talbot of Cinnabar!

CHAPTER XIV.
FOUR AGAINST ONE.

THERE was no mistake about it; there they stood, four determined, well-armed men—four against one.

The spectators gaped at the picture in amazement; some old miners were there among the throng, men who had witnessed many a desperate affray during their sojourn in a wild and lawless land, yet no one of them all could recall to memory a more reckless deed of daring than Richard Talbot's bold defiance.

Four against one! It was utter madness!

Molly could not restrain her woman's tongue at the sight.

"Only four!" she cried at the top of her lungs; "is there no more?—isn't there one or two more cowards in this Camp to take advantage of the opportunity to get the man they dare not face singly at a disadvantage?"

The attacking force hesitated; the biting taunt stung them. In truth, the attack did savor strongly of cowardice.

But Klamath John was not inclined to lose the golden opportunity to get even with the bold fellow who seemed to be the cock of the walk in Candle-box Camp.

"Fire at once; never mind the woman!" he cried to his companions, and suiting the action to the word he blazed away; the rest at once followed suit, advancing rapidly as they did so.

It was a perfect shower of bullets; shot succeeded shot in quick succession, and the echoes rung out sharp on the clear night air.

Talbot did not attempt to return the shots; he gave ground before the fierce attack, and then, as the assailants came hotly on, still keeping up their rapid fire, he suddenly stumbled and fell.

He essayed to rise; an exclamation escaped from his lips and then he rolled over on his side.

It was plain that he had been badly hurt.

Ten to one Talbot of Cinnabar was done for!

The girl in the window could restrain herself no longer.

"Oh, you utter cowards! you brutal murderers!" she screamed, violently, and then, wild with rage, she thrust her revolvers out of the window and fired.

A yell of triumph had ascended from the throats of the leagued men at Talbot's fall, and they suspended firing.

Their yell was answered by Molly's exclamation, and the bullets of her revolvers, which, though, were entirely harmless, for the girl was too much excited to take aim.

"Are you mad?" cried Klamath John, in a rage, as he threw up his arm and took deliberate aim at the girl in the window. "Fire another shot and I'll send your soul to its Maker before the report dies away on the air."

Hardly had the words escaped from the lips of the angry man when the quick report of a pistol rung out sharply on the night air.

Klamath John's extended arm fell; the revolver dropped from his nerveless grasp, and a deep curse came from his lips.

The bullet had torn a way through the hunter's good right arm, and the shot had come from Talbot's revolver!

Bold Dick had "played 'possum," so as to draw the fire of his antagonists. He had judged, and judged rightly, that even an expert marksman would be far more apt to fail to hit a man extended upon the ground than one standing erect.

The shot most certainly had saved the life of the girl, for a bitter defiance trembled on her lips even as the bullet of Talbot crippled the trusty right hand of the hunter.

The moment the shot was fired Dick sprang to his feet and advanced rapidly toward his foes.

The attacking party were confused by this daring movement; their revolvers were nearly empty; there were not five shots left in the party, and all of them were so amazed by Talbot's bold advance that they hardly knew what to do.

"One!" cried Dick, as he came on, and the crack of his revolver followed the word.

The bullet cut through the shoulder of the big fellow. With a yell of pain the giant turned upon his heel and fled. He had got all he wanted.

Kanaka Bill and his partner stood their ground and fired a couple of shots, but their hands trembled and the bullets went wide of Dick's stalwart frame.

Then two tongues of fire flamed from the muzzles of his pistols, and so true the aim that both of his stout antagonists went down, wounded by the leaden missiles.

And now came Klamath John's chance; as Talbot had advanced, he had deliberately raised his wounded right arm, from which the blood was streaming freely, and, despite the pain that the action caused him, had taken careful aim with the pistol which he held in his left hand, using the wounded arm as a rest.

A fierce gleam was on his face as he pulled the trigger, for he felt sure that he held the life of the bold stranger at his mercy; but in this world man proposes and fate disposes.

Upon the goodness of an uncertain cap hung the life of Dick Talbot.

Fortune smiled upon the reckless man, who was, in good truth, one of her most favored followers.

The cap missed fire.

Wheeling quickly, with a snap-shot, apparently fired without aim, the adventurer "dropped" the hunter.

The fight was ended; three men lay wounded upon the field, while the fourth had taken to his heels and fled, thinking discretion to be the better part of valor.

Talbot cast a glance around him, but no other foe presented himself, and the men who had suffered were disabled for the present.

"Gentlemen, the show is over!" the conqueror exclaimed, "but if anybody wants me I can easily be found." And then he walked quietly away, the best man of his inches who had ever stepped foot within the limits of Candle-box Camp.

The bystanders, awed and amazed by the strange scene which they had witnessed, came from their "coigns of vantage" and hurried to inspect the wounded men who had fallen before Talbot's sure aim.

The miners expected that they would be called upon to assist at three funerals on the morrow, but, to their astonishment, upon examination they discovered that the wounded men were but slightly hurt and that there was not the remotest danger of their dying yet awhile.

None of the men were hit in a vital part, and with careful nursing were certain soon to recover from their injuries.

The miners stanchd the blood flowing from the hurt men, and assisted them to their cabin. All three occupied the same shanty—a rude log structure on the outskirts of the town, and Lean Tom Johnson, the stage-driver, volunteered to sit up with the wounded men that night.

Not that the veteran stage-driver at all approved of their attack upon the new-comer, but, as he quaintly expressed it:

"Mebbe, they kinder had an idea that they were a-fighting for the credit of the town, and we ought not to go back on 'em, boys, even if the strange pilgrim did turn out to be the cock of the walk."

With the departure of the wounded men the curtain, so to speak, descended upon the scene; the play was over, and the spectators departed, in different directions.

The old general and the two ladies, who, as if spellbound, had remained and witnessed the scene from beginning to end, walked slowly down the street toward the mine.

All the three being fresh from the East, for even the young lady from Angels, though California born, had spent nearly all of her life at a boarding-school on the Atlantic coast, were considerably astonished at what they had seen.

"By Jove!" exclaimed the old general, "who would have believed that that quiet fellow was such a fire-eater?"

"Father, are such scenes as we have witnessed to night common in California?" asked Desdemona, abruptly.

"Well, my dear, not exactly common, and yet not uncommon; it is a wild land as yet, and the strong hand of civilization is lacking. In time, though, it will be all right."

"This Mr. Talbot is just a splendid fellow!" Miss Jones averred, enthusiastically; "don't you think so, Dessy dear?"

"He is brave enough, but so is the desperado always, and I am afraid that Mr. Talbot, quiet as he seems to be generally, is not one to retreat from a contest even though it may be accomplished with honor."

"You are too severe, my dear," the general rejoined. "You don't understand the customs of this wild region. The law is powerless here, and, to a certain extent, might makes right. Talbot was a stranger here, and his metal had not been tested. The bullies of the Camp wanted to find out what kind of a man he was, and so they forced a quarrel on him, and he, being well-used to this sort of thing, at once took the bull by the horns, and I think from the display that he has made to-night the fighting men of this Camp will give him a pretty wide berth in the future."

"Possibly he acted for the best," Desdemona admitted, "yet the man seems suited for something better than such a life as this."

The speech was a regretful one, and fully betrayed the deep interest which the girl had taken in him who, that night, had proved himself to be the "chief" of Candle-box Camp.

Upon two other persons the extraordinary feat of Talbot had also made a great impression. Blair, the bonanza king, and his man Friday, the bold McCracken, had witnessed the affair, from beginning to end.

"Be the holy poker!" McCracken cried, after the affray was finished, "this Talbot is a broth of a bye!"

"You are right for a hundred dollars!" Blair replied, "and he's the very man I want."

"Faix! I'm afeard that it won't be an aisy thing to handle him."

"Oh, yes, it will be," confidently. "He will come high of course. Men that amount to anything are always dear, you know. We'll go down and see him to-morrow."

"S'pose he doesn't see it, eh?"

"Then I'll either drive him out of this Camp or kill him!"

This, perhaps, was easier said than done.

CHAPTER XV.
IN COUNCIL.

THREE weeks passed away from the date upon which the wonderful night affray described in our last chapter had taken place, before anything occurred worthy of note.

In that time Talbot had succeeded in getting the mine into working order, engaged his hands, commenced getting out ore and set the stamps to work.

The threats of the unknown who had chosen for a blazon the blood-red hand, did not seem to worry the new superintendent in the least, and it was evident to all that at last the unlucky mine was being run by one who was "game" to the backbone.

The general was very anxious. Being a genial old gentleman, it had not taken him long to get acquainted with his neighbors, and some of them, thinking that he ought to know all the particulars in regard to the mine, had revealed to him that he had bought a property which had succeeded, so far, in "breaking" every man who had had anything to do with it since the lode was developed.

This information made him feel and look grave; at last he began to see that he was no match for the sharps of California street, and that the prospect ahead was far from being a rose-colored one.

He told Talbot what he had heard, but the superintendent, already posted, declared it as his belief that there was money in the mine, or else there would not have been so much trouble made about it; but, as he tersely said, in conclusion:

"It will not take more than three months to test the thing; and then, if the 'plant' is worthless, you are stuck, of course; but if the lode is good for anything, why, it was dirt-cheap at the price you paid for it. As for violence, that is a game two can play at. These fellows have had a taste of my quality, and I do not believe any of them are particularly anxious to try it on again."

The general felt quite encouraged, for he had great faith in this quiet, determined man.

Blair, and his coadjutor, McCracken, had not been idle all this while.

The bonanza king had visited the mine and introduced himself to the general, representing that he had come up into that region to look after a good paying speculation. McCracken accompanied Blair, and the old speculator was really delighted to see the two, for such acquaintances were pleasant in such a wild region.

Of course the old gentleman introduced the two to the ladies.

The young lady from Angels was particularly delighted, for, as she said to Desdemona in strict confidence, she was really dying for a good flirtation, and the only good-looking young man around, Talbot, was no good at all, for he was very polite and that was all; a girl might as well try to get up a flirtation with a stone image.

Blair exerted all his powers to make himself agreeable to the ladies, the general's daughter in particular; but she, although polite and agreeable, yet kept the sharper at a distance, much to his disgust.

"This girl is as proud as Lucifer!" he declared to McCracken, one afternoon, as the two strolled away from the mine after paying a visit to the ladies. "Yes, sir, as proud as Lucifer!" he repeated, "and as cold as an iceberg! By Jove, McCracken, I sometimes despair of ever warming this woman into anything like life."

"Mebbe yer not the bye to do that same?" the Irishman suggested.

"Oh, you mean to insinuate that somebody else would have better luck, eh?"

"That is the size of it, me bye! She's not for yees."

"No, nor for any one else either, if I know anything about her," Blair asserted, decidedly. "I think I understand her, for I have been studying her very carefully since I have been here. I have had a splendid chance, you know. She's got a deuced lot of high-strung notions about her. She's from the East, you know, and she has kinder got an idea in her head that there ain't anybody out on this coast that is good enough for her. She's great on culture, and blue blood, and all that sort of thing. She thinks that we California sharps are all a set of gamblers and rascals—"

"Bedad! she's not far wrong, is she?" McCracken interrupted, jocosely.

"None of your jokes, Mac," Blair answered. "I reckon that when the thing is figured out rightly, we Pacific-slope fellows are no worse than speculators in other parts of the world, only we are more open about what we do, and care less for the opinion of the world."

"Yes, me bye; that's true enough; but if the lady has an opinion like that to the fore, what chance is there for you?"

"When her father gets into difficulties I have

an idea that she will put her pride into her pocket, and, making a virtue of necessity, accept a gentleman about my size. I had an idea that she was inclined to be romantic, and high-strung, but this infernal pride of hers is stronger than anything else. Did you notice to-day when she was telling about her family, how her eyes sparkled when she said that her folks could trace their line clear 'way back to some old baron or other? The fact is, Mac, I want a family tree more than anything else to win this woman. I've got the money, and now all that I lack is the blue blood; I'm going to fix that up right, too. There's a sharp in the East, New York, I think, who makes a business out of that sort of thing; all you've got to do is to pay him enough, and he'll trace you clear back to Noah. Oh, I'm going in for a pedigree that will make my lady's eyes open when she sees it."

"Mister Blair, will you excuse me if I differ wid ye?" the Irishman asked.

"How?"

"If I read this girl right, and it's a dale of experience I've had, if she made up her mind to fall in love with a fellow, she'd pitch pride to the devil, and if ye're not careful, the furst thing ye know, whin ye go to put yer finger on yer bird, ye'll find that she's not there."

"Mac, you are generally a pretty shrewd fellow, but I think you are out, here."

"Ye'll find that I am not; whin this girl is started, a raging volcano will be nothing to her. I tell ye, me bye, these cold and quiet women are the worst whin they get started."

"Even supposing that you are right, and that I am wrong, as long as she remains here the opportunity is wanted," Blair remarked, thoughtfully. "There is no man in this Camp that such a woman as this would be apt to pick out as a lover."

"Ye forget this Talbot!" McCracken reminded.

A shade came over the face of the Bonanza King and he walked along, reflecting intently for a few moments.

"By Jove!" he cried at last, abruptly, "I don't know but what you are right, Mac. I never thought of the fellow in connection with the girl, before. It don't seem hardly possible there can be any danger that such a thing can happen, and yet these women—"

"Women are mighty unsartain!" and the Irishman gave a wise shake of the head.

"We must go for Talbot, at once!" Blair declared, with decision. "I don't think there is any danger, but in this game we mustn't throw away the slimmest chance to take a trick. I think, though, from what I have seen, that this girl who runs the hotel is after Talbot."

"Molly Missouri? Oh, yis, there's no doubt about that."

"Not the slightest, in my opinion; don't you remember what a decided stand she took for him on the night of the fight?"

"Oh, yis; and now, if we can't do anything wid Talbot, and the ginerals daughter does take it into her head to fall in love wid me bold buckaroo, wouldn't it be a good idea to use the one gurl ag'in' the other? Molly is a strapping lass, and a regular tearer when she gets a-going."

"The idea is a good one, and we'll try it, if it is needed, although I can hardly bring myself to believe that there is any danger of such a proud, haughty beauty as Desdemona falling in love with such a fellow as Talbot. Why, he seems to be a regular desperado, but women do take strange fancies."

"Faix! they do."

"See Talbot at once, and sound him, and if he isn't to be had—if he will not work with us, why, then, we must take measures to put him out of the way as soon as possible. The three fellows that he had the fight with, whom he so cleverly whipped, were out to-day. They feel pretty sore over their thrashing, and, although they do not intend to pursue the quarrel any further at present—so this big fellow, this Klamath John informed me—yet from the way in which he spoke, I can see that he was just hungry for a good chance to get even with Talbot. And the next time they go for him, they won't give him any chance for his life; they'll take him at such a fearful disadvantage that he will be sure to go under in the fight."

"I have an idea," McCracken said. "If Mister Talbot is ugly and won't listen to reason, betune the gurl of the Happy Palace, and these three gentlemen, whom the superintendent bate so easily, I can fix a trap that will end his career in this Camp."

"Good! you had better go back now and see him."

"I will; it won't take me long to find out whether he's for or ag'in' us. In ten minutes I'll let ye know how he stands."

"And if he is obstinate, it will be good-by to Mr. Dick Talbot of Cinnabar!" was Blair's confident assertion.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE INTERVIEW.

McCracken had an extremely good opinion of himself and he had not the slightest doubt that he would be able to twist Talbot around his finger, for, although the superintendent had displayed wonderful fighting qualities, yet the

demagogue was sure that in the wily arts peculiar to the politician Talbot was unpracticed.

Therefore it was with the greatest confidence that the cunning Irishman essayed the difficult, and—when Talbot's peculiar nature was considered—somewhat dangerous task that Blair had assigned to him.

McCracken really believed that he would succeed. He had great experience with all sorts of men, and there were few he had not succeeded in handling.

With the wily Englishman he believed that every man had his price; the only difficulty was to discover exactly what that price was. Money would buy nearly every man, provided the purchaser bid high enough, and where money failed, some other influence would surely succeed.

"Faix now!" McCracken muttered, as he came near the mine, "if it wasn't for the foolish notion that me friend Blair has got in his head about the gurl, supposing Talbot can't be had for money, we might offer him the gurl, if his thoughts run that way; but, as it is, I can't. It plays the devil wid business whin ye mix up women wid it."

The Irishman found the negro at the gate of the stockade, as usual seated upon the bowlder, and as he came up Ginger Blue rolled his eyes in a way that plainly showed he had a most decided aversion to the bold McCracken.

If there was anything in this world the sable guardian of the Candle-box mine hated, it was an Irishman, and he was never slow to manifest this aversion.

McCracken's visits to the mine had annoyed him greatly, the more so that, as he had always been accompanied by Blair or the general, his employer, he had never got a good opportunity to express his sentiments.

Then, too, the negro's rage had been excited. The Irishman was something of a dandy, and the idea of such a big Patlander being rigged out in store-clothes from top to toe and sporting a "biled shirt," and a gold-headed cane, was altogether too much for the darky's patience.

As McCracken approached the negro got up and placed his brawny figure in the doorway, thus barring the passage.

"Say, w'at does you want hyer?" the darky exclaimed, as the caller paused in amazement at the unexpected action. "Don't you know dat we don't allow no dogs or Irishers 'bout dese hyer works?"

For a moment McCracken was speechless with rage. Of all things in this world he detested a negro.

"Be the powers! ye blackamoors ye! do yees know who ye are addressing, bad 'cess to the likes of yees?" he demanded.

"Don't want any talk out of you!" the darky replied, coolly. "Go 'way! don't want no sich white trash as you is foolin' round dis hyer mine!"

"Get out wid ye!" McCracken cried. "I've half a mind to bate ye black and blue, only I wouldn't be after soiling my hands with the likes of yees, ye gorilla!"

"Go 'way wid yer, yerself!" Ginger retorted. "Don't you dar' to raise dat are cane to me, or I'll wipe you all ober dis yere ground. I'll gorilla one Irishman for suah!"

"Do yees know who I am?"

"A big-mouthed Irisher!" Ginger responded, in contempt.

"Ye lie, ye black devil ye; I'm a gintleman!"

"Go 'way wid yer! You can't play dat air game hyer. Whar did yer steal dem clothes? Take 'em off and grab a pick as yer ought to! Dat's w'at an Irishers fer."

"For two cints I'd grab you, ye baboon!" and the Irishman shook his cane menacingly.

At this Ginger became frightfully enraged.

"Who are you a-calling a baboon? No more baboon dan you are! Go 'way, you poor, mean white man, or I'll frow you into de ribber!"

That the darky and McCracken would have most certainly come to blows is sure, had not Talbot's attention been attracted by the noise of the dispute and so led him to come forward to ascertain the reason.

"Hallo, w'at's the matter, Ginger?" he asked, as he came up.

"Dis yere hod-carrier tryin' fur to git in, dat's all!" the negro replied, glaring at his foe.

"It's a word or two that I want wid you, Mister Talbot," McCracken hastened to say.

"and this lump of charcoal barred me way and denied me admittance. It's lucky for him that ye came, Mister Talbot, for I was jist after crackin' him over the head wid me cane so as to learn him manners."

"By golly! it's lucky for you dat you didn't!" Ginger retorted. "If you had jes' hit me once wid dat cane, dere would have been a dead Irisher round dis hyer camp in two wags of a goat's tail."

"Do you want to see me, sir?" Talbot inquired, coldly, for he had taken a dislike to McCracken; his keen instinct had told him that the man was a rascal.

"If you will have the kindness to give me five minutes of your valuable time," the Irishman said.

"Certainly."

"In private," and as he spoke McCracken looked disdainfully at the black.

"Say, white man, you don't want to turn up dat nose of yours any more dan it does now!" Ginger exclaimed. "It's the wuss-looking nose dat I ebber see'd!" And with this parting shot the negro resumed his position on the stone again.

McCracken clutched his cane angrily, but by an effort he restrained himself; after all, the negro was not worth wasting time upon.

The Irishman led the way round the angle of the stockade; Talbot followed; then, secure from observation, the agent proceeded at once to business.

"Mr. Talbot, it is possible that I may not be unknown to you," he began. "Me name is McCracken; I have done the State some service—"

"I didn't know that you had ever been in jail," Talbot interrupted, his manner very earnest, and his face so quiet that it was almost impossible to suspect him of joking.

McCracken stared for a moment, open-mouthed; metaphorically speaking, the implication confounded him.

"Oh no; you do not understand me, my friend!" he exclaimed, as soon as he could recover. "It was but a figure of spach that I was using, a poetical fancy, do ye mind. As I was saying, I have been honored by me fellow-citizens wid many marks of public trust—"

"And the point is, I suppose, you want a chance to swing a pick, or handle a shovel in the mine here," interrupted Talbot, in the most matter-of-fact way. "Well, I can't oblige you; we've got all the hands we want."

McCracken was disgusted; he began to have an idea that this quiet Mr. Talbot was poking fun at him.

"No, sir, no, sir!" he exclaimed; "it is on private and particular business that I have wid you."

"Yes? Well, go ahead!"

"The fact is, Mister Talbot, it is not for me-selt that I am sp'aking, but I represent another party."

"Who is it?" Talbot naturally inquired.

"Aha! that is a secret!" McCracken replied, mysteriously. "There may be more than one—there may be five or tin at the back of me."

"Oh yes; that may be, for all I know, but, what has this got to do with me?"

"Aisy! I'm coming to it! It's an able man ye air, Mister Talbot; it's a foine man ye are for this region, and the party that I have the honor to represent are lookin' after jest such a man as ye are."

"I am sorry that I am not at liberty to negotiate," Talbot replied. "I am bound to General Cadwalader as long as he chooses to keep me."

"Oho! That doesn't matter the laste taste in life!" McCracken announced. "What I want of you will not interfere wid your present engagement at all."

Talbot looked surprised.

"Well, sir, I can't understand how that can be. I am so busy here that I can't possibly get time to attend to anything else."

"It will not interfere in the laste, sir," the Irishman answered. "Maybe if you were not connected wid this mine the parties that I represent would have no use for you."

These words gave Talbot a clew to the design of the messenger from men unknown, but he resolved to draw him out and make him explain himself clearly.

"I don't understand what you are driving at," he said, in affected ignorance. "Spit out what you have to propose so that I can get a clear idea of what you mean."

The Irishman, with all his shrewdness, fell into the trap.

"It's aisy enough," he confessed. "I want to engage you, Mister Talbot, as our man. You kin name your own figure; make it a liberal one, and we will pay the price; but you must belong to us."

"What am I to do?"

"Whatever we order you! Don't be alarmed; it will be nothin' ag'in' the law."

"Suppose you order me to do a certain thing and General Cadwalader orders me to do exactly the opposite?"

"You are to obey us and not the ginerals."

"Old hoss! we can't trade!" Talbot returned, abruptly, much to McCracken's astonishment. "I'm the general's man, and there ain't gold enough in California to buy me over to the other side!"

"Oh, bless me soul!" exclaimed McCracken, in pretended amazement. "It's nothing to do wid the ginerals! We only wanted to get you into our speculation, that's all, as you are a foine man to have the handling of a mine. There's no harm done, ye know. If ye iver want to l'ave the ginerals, maybe we kin make room for ye. Good-morning!"

And the Irishman walked off, apparently unconcerned, but in reality greatly chafed at his poor success, and as he disappeared around one angle of the wall the general's daughter came round the other.

CHAPTER XVII.

A LITTLE LIGHT.

TALBOT was not conscious of the approach of the girl. He was watching the Irishman's retreating coat-tails, and, as they disappeared around the angle of the stockade, the thought which surged so swiftly through the brain of the adventurer took shape in words:

"What cunning trick is this fellow up to, now?" he murmured, talking to himself, a habit which nearly all men who lead a solitary life often indulge in. "It is some scheme against the general and his mine, I am sure. The lode is a pretty good one, I feel certain, although it has bu'st up every party that has tried to run it, but there's a sable individual in the wood-pile, beyond a doubt. This unknown party wants to buy me, because, from the slight taste of my quality that the men of this Camp already have had, they think I am not the kind of man to frighten, easily. Now, the question is, are McCracken and his gang working the blood-red hand business, or are there two parties working to get the mine out of the general's hands? That's a point that I must have some light upon. Now, then, whom does McCracken represent? This Blair, sure! I've heard of this Bonanza King before, and it is a wonder to me that some desperate man, whom he has robbed by his legal tricks, hasn't emptied the contents of a revolver into him. His presence, here, means mischief; what is he after? What other piece of property around here is worth any trouble, but the Candle-box lode? Clearly, then, whether he is the hand unknown who is pulling the wires of this road-agent business or not, he is bent upon mischief, and the old general is about as fit to fight these fellows as a ten-year old child. Now, what is ahead of me? I have refused to go in with these schemers, and, as I am not with them, of course I am against them, which means, since they cannot buy me, that they must use force. I must keep my wits about me, or else they'll check me through to the Happy Hunting Grounds, the first thing I know."

The rustle of a woman's dress, at this point, fell upon Talbot's ear, and, turning, he faced the general's daughter.

She had come straight up to him, expecting that he would hear her, but he had been so occupied with his thoughts that the noise of her approach had escaped his notice, and so it happened that the last sentence of his speech reached her ears.

Despite the peculiar way in which he had framed the thought, she understood what he meant.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Talbot," she said, "I did not intend to overhear your words, but, since I have unwittingly done so, and I gather from them that some danger threatens you, I make bold to ask its nature."

"Indeed, miss, that is exactly what I cannot tell you," he replied, frankly. "My instincts, which are very seldom at fault, warn me that there is danger ahead, but precisely what the danger is, I cannot say. I've just had an interview with Mr. McCracken; you know him, miss?"

The girl nodded assent, and a slight tinge of color crept over her usually pale face.

McCracken and Blair were always together, and the mention of the one suggested the other; and the Bonanza King, since his arrival in the mining-camp, had rapidly developed into a suitor, despite the coldness of the girl.

Desdemona was in an unpleasant position; she could not keep out of the man's way now, as she had done in San Francisco; as a lady, she must treat him politely, and upon that politeness he presumed to press his suit.

"He left me just as you came up. He came to make me a proposition; he wanted to engage my services."

A peculiar look came into the girl's dark eyes, and she fixed her gaze intently upon Talbot's face.

"Is your position here, then, Mr. Talbot, distasteful to you, that you wish to leave it?" she asked.

"Oh, no; I did not say that I had any idea of leaving," he replied. "The offer came from him. It was a very strange offer, too. He said that he represented a certain party who wanted to make me their man—to bind me to obey their orders, and I could still retain my position in your father's employ."

"I do not understand how you can serve two employers."

"Miss, I am afraid they intend to try and work your father out of the Candle-box property. The lode is a rich one, I think, and there is a certain man in this Camp, who, if report does not traduce his character greatly, will not hesitate at any means to gain the end he seeks."

The girl understood who the man was as well as if Talbot had mentioned his name. Blair never made any secret of the means he used if success attended the result.

"I am afraid that my father is not fit to cope with these men," she observed, slowly.

"Well, miss; I am afraid that he is not, but I will try and do the best I can to help him out. I've had considerable experience in this sort of thing, and up in this region, miss, there ain't

much law, except the law of the stronger. There's some game afoot; I feel sure of that; but, what it is, and how it is going to be worked, of course it is impossible for me to guess; but you may rest assured of one thing, and that is, that I am calculating the chances just as closely as a man can. I have picked my hands pretty carefully; there isn't a man in the place who doesn't understand that he's engaged to *fight*, as well as to work, if he's called upon so to do."

"Is there any danger of that?" Desdemona demanded, in some amazement, much astonished at the information.

"Oh, yes; a rich claim is 'jumped' every now and then, and it takes a fight to decide who owns it. To seize a claim is to 'jump' it, miss," Talbot explained. "As a rule, that game is seldom tried unless the party have got some sort of a claim to the mine."

"Mr. Blair said only this morning that he would like to buy an interest in the mine!" the girl announced.

"Just as I thought! I had an idea that *he* was the party in the background who was pulling the wires. Tell your father not to sell, miss! Don't let him get a cent's worth of interest in the property or else the first thing we know we'll all be in hot water."

"I will so advise my father," she replied, and then she swept past Talbot; "and, Mr. Talbot," she continued, "allow me to thank you for the interest you display in our property, and to assure you that we appreciate your zeal."

"Oh, yes; and if the mine pays, and your father holds onto it, he can afford to raise my wages," and as he spoke Talbot looked the girl full in the eye in the most innocent manner possible.

A troubled expression came rapidly over the girl's face; the color mounted into her cheeks, and she really looked distressed.

"I—I suppose so," she murmured, and then she hastened away, strange thoughts surging through her brain.

"Money—he speak of money!" she exclaimed, bitterly. "He is willing to risk his life for us, utter strangers to him, and yet he speaks as if gold was all he required in payment for the service."

Talbot watched the graceful figure of the girl until she turned the angle of the wall, a peculiar look upon his resolute face.

"And this scoundrel, Blair, has an idea of making up to this girl," he muttered, as she disappeared from his sight, "the fairest, freshest, proudest beauty that ever my eyes fell upon. She is indeed a glorious woman, and yet as proud as any queen who ever put her foot to earth. As fair as fair can be, and yet as cold as a marble statue and as disdainful as the child of a line that boasts a hundred earls. And, now that I come to think calmly over the matter, wasn't I a fool to mix myself up in this matter at all, lured on by this girl's beautiful marble face? And women ain't lucky for me either, or perhaps I ain't lucky for them, for never yet did I win one that death didn't snatch her almost before the honeymoon was over; but, I suppose, like the chip upon the river, I must float on the current of fate wherever my destiny leads me. For the present I am backing the Candle-box, and I don't intend that my game shall be beaten if I can help it."

And meditating in this manner Talbot retraced his steps.

At the door of the stockade he found Ginger in a high state of excitement. The negro had been meditating over his wordy war with the Irishman, and the more he thought about it the madder he got.

"See hyer, Massa Talbot!" he spluttered, as that gentleman came up. "Did you hear w'at dat big Irisher called me? He sed dat I was a baboon! I nebber was so insulted afore since I was hatched! Massa Talbot, you hear me now! I'll jest chew dat feller's ear off de very next time dat I set my two eyes on him."

"Look out that he don't whale you, Ginger!"

"Whale me! W'at *all* of me?" and the big black rose to his feet and stretched his muscular form to its fullest extent. "Look at me, Massa Talbot! Hyer's whar you git your men from, whar I growed. I wouldn't make more dan two mouthfuls of dat big Paddywhack! W'at does he want foolin' round dis yere works, anyway?"

"Oh, he was after a hand; he wanted to hire me."

"To hire you, Massa Talbot—dat feller? Why, he's no good! all he kin do is to talk."

"Well, he is a pretty good talker; to use the old saying, that is his best holt!" And with this observation Talbot went into the mine.

McCracken's proposal was somewhat of a surprise, but the superintendent was destined to receive another one before he retired to rest that night, for, just as the shades of night began to gather thick and heavy over the earth, the negro sought him, grinning from ear to ear, and delivered a note into his hands.

"What's this?" Talbot asked.

"Letter from your gal!" with a grin.

"From my girl!"

"Yes, sah; dat's w'at de boy sed w'at fetched it! Oh, I tell you what it is, Massa Talbot—it

takes us good-looking young buxks to catch de gals."

Talbot opened the letter at once.

CHAPTER XVIII.

MCCRACKEN'S SCHEME.

"FAIX! we'll have to crack this fellow's skull, bad 'cess to him! before he will listen to reason!" the Irishman muttered, as he hastened away.

He went at once to Blair, who waited for him at the hotel—Molly's ranch—and related to the speculator how unsuccessful his attempt had been to win the master-spirit of the Candle-box mine over to their side.

"Well, since fair means have failed we must try foul," that gentleman observed.

"He'll be a difficult man to handle," the Irishman warned.

"Yes, if we give him any chance for his life, and that is exactly what we must not do," Blair replied. "Now I am satisfied that these three fellows he fought the other night are just burning to get even with this Talbot."

"They won't meet him in fair fight of course, for they have tried that once and come out second best," the Irishman averred.

"No, I don't think any of them are eager to face the fellow in a good, square fight again; but now, Mac, can't we arrange it so that we can get Talbot into a trap?"

"A mighty difficult matter, me byel!" and McCracken gave a wise shake of the head. "This gentleman was not born yesterday, and he's as cute as a cross-country fox."

"Oh, we must be able to think of some way to trap him!" Blair persisted, impatiently. "Come, Mac, if you can't do this you are no good!"

"Hould your whist till I put on me thinking-cap," the Irishman admonished, reflectively.

"If you can think of some way—some clever device to induce Talbot to go to some lonely spot, I can have these fellows concealed in the neighborhood, and the chances are good that they will be able to settle him. If you can only devise the trick to fetch Talbot, all I will have to do is to get these fellows and tell them that I have heard that their man is going to be at a certain place at a certain time and they will do all the rest. You see, I won't be mixed up in the matter at all if the thing happens to go wrong."

"True fur yees," McCracken observed, in a meditative sort of way. Then a sudden idea occurred to him. "Oh, corn in Egypt!" he exclaimed; "I have it, me bye, I have it!"

"A plan?" cried Blair, eagerly.

"Yis, a beautiful one!"

"Go ahead, explain!"

"Oh, it's a foine plan—an illigant one! Ye know the gurl that kapes this place?"

"Molly?"

"Yis, she's a big friend to Talbot; you remember how she took his part, the night of the fight?"

"Yes, yes, I remember."

"She'll be a foine decoy-duck to lade Mr. Talbot exactly where we want him."

"Well, Mac, you may understand, but I'll be hanged if I do."

"It's as simple as rowling off a log. She thinks a hape of Talbot, ye know. I'll go to her and tell that, as I was coming up the street I overheard a conversation between two min saying how they were going to lay out Talbot to-night. How there's a plan to go to his shanty, call him to the dure and then slaughter him. I'll tell her that she ought to warn him for I'm afeard to mix myself up in the matter for fear I'll get into trouble."

"Yes, but I don't see—"

"Oh, I've me alone; I'll fix it all right!" McCracken enjoined. "Shure! I've not got the thing down exactly yit, meself. It will come to me, though—it will come to me on the spur of the moment. I'll go after the girl at once! Wait till I come back and it's the crown of England ag'in' a tenpenny nail you kin bet that I'll do the job up brown!"

The Irishman seized his hat and hurried out. This conversation had taken place in the room in the Happy Palace occupied in common by the town.

McCracken proceeded to the saloon which, as he had expected, he found tenanted only by the girl.

During the daytime the saloons in the mining camp do not flourish; all the men are at work, and it is not until darkness puts an end to toil that the town becomes lively.

The girl was seated by one of the windows, gazing listlessly out into the street.

As the Irishman had justly remarked; necessity with him was truly the mother of invention, and as he entered the saloon his plan only half-formed, a new idea came to him that seemed to be an extremely good one.

"Miss Missouri, kin I have a word wid you, if you pl'ase?" he asked, in his most gallant manner. He rather prided himself upon being a ladies' man.

"Yes, sir; what is it?" asked the girl.

"Are we alone?" McCracken questioned, mysteriously. "Is there any danger that we will be overheard?"

"No, I guess not," Molly replied, astonished at the Irishman's manner.

"Miss Missouri, it's a foine gurl ye are, although ye are obligated to keep this shebeen, and it's a shame, so it is, that bekase ye are not rigged out in silks and satins ye should be looked down upon."

"And who looks down upon me?" Molly demanded, angrily.

"Oh, I'll not mintion names!" with an assumption of great caution. "She's a foine gurl, too, but no better than ye are, though she does tilt her nose up in the air."

Molly's eyessparkled; she understood to whom he referred.

"But what I have to say to ye, Miss Molly, is about Mister Talbot," the Irishman continued.

"Mr. Talbot!" The girl was all attention now.

"Yes, Mister Talbot, and it's a dale of danger that threatens him, too."

"Mr. Talbot in danger!"

"Yis," and then he proceeded to relate at great length how he had overheard two men planning the death of Talbot right outside the hotel.

"He must be warned!" cried the girl.

"That is what I thought; but, me dear gurl, I am a stranger up in this region, and I've no great desire to git meself into any scrape wid the boys. I think that Talbot ought to be warned, though, and that is the reason why I spoke to ye. Now ye kin go to the mine and put him on his guard."

Molly shook her head; this idea did not please her at all. She had been to the mine once, and the remembrance of her encounter with the negro, and the curious eyes that were leveled at her, was still fresh in her memory.

"No, no!" she protested; "I don't wish to go to the mine. I'm not used to running after anybody, and the boys would all have the grand laugh on me if they caught me at it."

"Write to him, then!" McCracken suggested.

"Write to him and tell him that ye want to see him for five minutes on particular business. Isn't there any place near the town where you could see him this evening without any one being the wiser for it?"

"Yes; the big white rock up on the upper trail, just above the town."

"Write for him to meet you there at nine tonight, and thin ye kin warn him, and—mind ye now—I want ye to do this so that ye'll be able to put the nose of that haughty thing out of joint. Mebbe ye didn't know that that gurl down at the mine, the general's daughter, is jist dying for Mister Talbot."

"She had better mind her own business and go back to Frisco and marry some city chap!" and Molly's face expressed her contempt. "She's nothing but a big wax-doll thing, after all."

"You write the letter and I will see that Mister Talbot gits it in plenty of time; ye kin write?"

"What do you take me for, Irish?"

"Irisher!" cried McCracken, in astonishment. "Now, how in the world did ye know that I was an Irishman?"

"You smell of whisky," Molly replied, calmly.

"Oh, sorra a drop I've had this day!"

The girl proceeded to indite the letter. In truth she was not sorry to get another chance for an interview with Talbot.

"Dear Mr. Talbot," she wrote, "I want to see you, to-night, on very particular business. Will you please come to the big white rock just above the Camp, by the bank of the river, at nine o'clock?"

Yours truly, MOLLY MISSOURI.

She read the letter aloud after she had penned it.

"There!" she exclaimed; "how is that for high?"

"Beautiful, me gurl; it's truly illigant!"

"And you will see that he gets it?"

"I will that same, you may depend upon me, my darlint!"

The girl sealed the letter and McCracken put it away carefully.

"You see, me dear," he explained, "I can send the letter aisy enough, but if I was to go and warn him it might get out that I had a hand in the affair, and thin the blaggards would be after me, do ye mind?"

Molly saw the point, and thanked the Irishman for the trouble that he had taken. McCracken withdrew from the room, explaining that he would get his cane and then see that the note was delivered.

But the moment he got into his own apartment he unsealed the note, which was easily done, rubbed out the nine—it was written in pencil—and put eight in its place.

"Do you see, me buck?" he explained to Blair. "He'll come at eight instead of nine, and in place of Molly he'll find the min that hate him. Now, if Mister Talbot gits out of this trap it will be bekase, like a cat, he's got nine lives instead of one."

CHAPTER XIX.

MR. TUBBS AGAIN.

McCracken's scheme was an extremely simple one, and often in this world a simple trick succeeds when a more elaborate one would fail.

The Irishman easily found a boy lounging along the street who readily agreed to deliver the note in consideration of a "two-bit" piece, and in a quiet way he prepared the boy for the cross-examination which he thought it probable he would undergo.

"Miss Molly Missouri wants this letter to go to the Candle-box mine, and you're not to say who it's from," he explained.

The boy winked and grinned; he was a sharp little customer, and understood that he mustn't tell, but if he yielded to a bribe, the chances were about a hundred to one that he would say the girl sent him but didn't want any one to know it.

At the gate of the mine, though, the messenger was confronted by the colored "gemman," who refused to let him pass.

"Go 'way, sonny!" the redoubtable Ginger had commanded. "We don't 'low children to fool round dis yere mine."

"But I've got a letter!" announced the boy, holding out the missive.

Ginger at once snatched it, much to the disgust and rage of the boy, who had calculated upon receiving another two-bit piece from the party in the mine for whom the letter was intended; but the unexpected action of the negro upset this reckoning, of course, and the black was deaf to all the remonstrances hurled upon him by the angry messenger.

"Go 'long wid ye! go 'long!" he cried; "run home, sonny; your mudder will want you. I'll tend to dis yere t'ing myself."

So the boy was obliged to content himself with bestowing upon Ginger a few choice epithets more remarkable for force than for elegance.

"Who is you a-calling a big black nigger?" yelled Ginger, in a rage, as he reached for a "rock;" thereupon the boy took to his heels and retreated.

"I'll jes' mash you, one of dese days!" the darky howled after the boy; then he went inside the stockade and gave the letter to the first person he saw, which happened to be the general's daughter.

Miss Jones, of Angels, was with Desdemona as usual, and her eyes opened widely when she saw that the letter was directed to Mr. Talbot, in a woman's hand.

The writing was not particularly elegant, being somewhat scrawly, but it evidently was penned by a woman.

"This note is for Mr. Talbot," Desdemona said, giving it back to the negro.

"Where did it come from, Ginger—who brought it?" Miss Jones demanded, unable to restrain her devouring curiosity.

"A boy, misses, and 'deed I'll jes' smash him de next time I lays my two hands on him. He jes' call me more names in two minutes dan I ebber was called afore!"

"Mr. Talbot is in the mill, I think," Desdemona remarked.

"I'll find 'um!" and Ginger departed.

"Did you notice that letter, Dessy?" Miss Jones asked, a look of extreme amazement on her round, fat face.

"Yes, I saw it, of course," Desdemona replied, quietly.

"A letter for Mr. Talbot, and written by a woman?"

"Yes, it looked like a female's handwriting."

"Oh, it was; there isn't any doubt about it, at all. It must be from that girl who keeps the saloon."

"Perhaps so!" Desdemona seemed indifferent.

Miss Jones surveyed her for a moment, a peculiar look upon her not usually expressive countenance.

"Well, you don't seem to take much interest in the matter," Miss Jones observed, after quite a pause.

"Why should I?"

"Why should you?" and Miss Jones's tone betrayed extreme amazement.

"Yes, why should I?" Desdemona repeated, a slight touch of uneasiness perceptible in her voice.

"It's from a woman—this girl of course!"

"That is no business of mine. What do I care who writes to him, man or woman?" the other asked, a little bit impatiently.

"Oh, well! Do you know, Desdemona, I really thought that there was going to be a love affair between you two."

"What nonsense!" and Desdemona spoke scornfully.

"He's a splendid fellow!"

"He may be, to some tastes."

"There's not many men in this world, even in California, who would have stood up and faced four well-armed men as he did, the other night." Miss Jones had a great idea of the inhabitants of California. No matter where a man was born, after he had resided in the Golden State for a little while, he measurably improved; there was something about the climate—the "glowing climate of California"—that made men better, braver and wiser than they ever had been before.

"It was a brave enough act; there is no disputing the fact that the man is perfectly reckless, and does not seem to care whether he lives or dies."

"It was a heroic feat!" Miss Jones persisted, enthusiastically. "Why, as I stood and looked on, I couldn't help thinking about the brave deeds of the knights of old, that we used to read about when we went to school."

Desdemona's lip curled just a little bit; it was plain that the extravagant tone of the other was distasteful to her.

"And this letter," Miss Jones continued. "I am sure that it's from the girl that keeps the saloon. Don't you remember how she took his part that night? Why, she was going to fight just like a man! She's a horrid bold creature!"

"She is not so refined as she might be."

"And she is after Mr. Talbot, too."

"Perhaps so."

"And I don't believe that he cares two straws for her."

"Perhaps not."

"You don't seem to care much about it."

"Why should I care?" the general's daughter retorted. "You weary me, Polly, with this constant harping upon the subject. I am not in love with Mr. Talbot if you are."

At this direct thrust the young lady from Angels got very red in the face.

"I'm sure that I'm not in love with him, and if I was, much good it would do me while you were around! Oh, you cannot deceive me; I'm not such a fool as I look. And I'm not such a quiet, deep thing as you are, either. If I cared for a fellow I couldn't help showing it."

"That is as much as to say that I can," the other observed, coldly, terribly annoyed, although she managed to conceal it very well.

"Yes, you know that you can, you awful thing you!"

The appearance of a man at the gate of the stockade interrupted the conversation at this point.

The new-comer was no stranger, for both of the girls recognized the redoubtable Tubbs on the instant.

He came smilingly forward upon perceiving the ladies, and when near enough he saluted them with a most wonderful bow.

"Ladies, I am your most obedient servant!" in the grandiloquent tone so common to him.

"I had the pleasure of seeing you at my entertainment the other night. I assure you upon my honor that I was enchanted beyond description when I perceived that there were at least two auditors present who could appreciate the merit and beauties of my performance."

The ladies did not seem impressed; they did not have a very good opinion of the comedian whom they looked upon as a vagabond and an outcast.

There is a great deal of difference between the genius who treads the "boards" in a lonely mining camp and his more fortunate brother who lords it on the stage of a great opera-house.

Tubbs was not in the least abashed by the coldness of his reception; in fact, so blind was he with egotism, and so big in his own opinion, that even the rough usage which for years he had received at the hands of a disgusted public had not had power to convince him that the dramatic art was better without than with him.

The favorite son of Arkansaw was slightly demented—a little "cracked" upon one thing; he believed with all his heart and soul that he was a genius, and the worse his endeavors were received the stronger became his belief. As he himself expressed it, when referring to the subject, he had a soul above buttons and one of these days the world would awake to the knowledge that he was a great artist.

In one respect Tubbs was a genius; he always managed to live without worrying his soul much with work; and where a better man would almost have starved to death the comedian waxed fat. Like a cat, no matter how often the petard of fortune hoisted him into the air, invariably when he came down he landed upon his feet.

In the present case he had managed to get into the good graces of Molly Missouri, and in consideration of his playing the violin in the Happy Palace at night, to entertain the miners, she gave him board and lodgings.

And the girl really believed that the man was a genius, too; his high-flown talk, and extravagant speeches, she took in sober earnest, and, not being able through contact with the world, like the two ladies of the Candle-box mine to tell pinchbeck from gold, she was firm in her opinion that her protégé was in reality a man of wonderful merit.

"Ah, ladies," Tubbs continued, "if you only knew how your beautiful faces inspired my muse and led my soaring soul to 'mount on eagle wings, kings to make gods, and meaner creatures kings, you would I am sure be delighted."

"Who do you wish to see, sir?" inquired Desdemona, with that cold courtesy with which an educated person rebukes presumption.

But Tubbs, wrapped from head to heels in his own conceit, was not at all abashed.

"Mr. Talbot—the heroic Talbot, a direct descendant, no doubt, of that stout Talbot who, in the realm of France, as Shakspeare says, was 'the noblest Roman of them all!' I owe him

much, and yet with foul intent did I pursue him hither, but now I do repent me that I did do this deed!"

"You'll find Mr. Talbot in the mill yonder; come, Polly," Desdemona remarked, eager to get rid of the man, and then the two ladies retreated into the house, while Tubbs advanced toward the mill.

CHAPTER XX.

THE COMEDIAN'S LITTLE GAME.

JUST as the comedian reached the door of the mill, Talbot came out of the building, the letter crumpled up in his hand.

He had been considerably astonished upon receiving the missive, and had come from the mill to question the negro regarding it.

Tubbs struck an attitude immediately upon beholding him.

"It is he!" he cried; "my eyes do not deceive me! It is me noble preserver! Shake!" and the comedian extended his hand.

Talbot did not reciprocate this enthusiasm, and did not notice the proffered hand.

"Hallo, what do you want?"

"I come from Fife, great king, where the Norwegian banners flout the sky and fan our people cold!" spouted Tubbs.

"Oh, stop your tomfoolery!" exclaimed Talbot, impatiently. "Do you want to see me?"

"I do, mighty satrap!"

"Well, what is it?"

"To pour out before thee my wealth of thanks for thy bold deed on yonder night. It was the heftiest thing I ever see'd!"

Mr. Tubbs dropped from the sublime into the slang of the mining-camp with wonderful celerity.

"You'll get killed one of these days," Talbot remarked, coldly. "You had better keep out of these camps; you are not appreciated."

"True genius never is," Tubbs assumed, with a doleful shake of the head; "but, as to the mining-camps, they treat me a deuced sight better than the big cities do. I manage to pick up a living in such places as this, but when I was down in Frisco I pretty near starved to death; and, as to being killed, no miners ever treated me as bad as the Frisco Hoodlums did, the night I made my *début* at the Bella Union. First I was plastered all over with bad eggs, then knocked down by a head of cabbage, and before I could get up they emptied a sack of flour all over me. I tell you I was a sight! I ain't much on the fight; that ain't my game; but, even the worm will turn sometimes, and I sailed in that night, and the result was, I not only got thrashed till I ached in every bone, but they hauled me off to the calaboose and sent me up for ten days as a vagrant with no visible means of support. No more Frisco for me; no such sugar in mine, thank you!"

"You are hanging out at the Happy Palace, I understand." He had an idea that Tubbs perhaps bore a message from the girl.

"Oh, yes, I'm helping Molly to run the show," Tubbs explained, with the easy cheerfulness that seldom deserted him.

"Ain't you rather ashamed to hang around there, living on that girl?" Talbot demanded, severely.

Tubbs stared, for the question amazed him.

"Why, she couldn't get along without me now!" he assured. "I've put her up to more dodges to make money than she ever dreamed of! Oh, I'm a sly 'coon, I am! I tell you what it is, old feller, I ain't knocked round the world from pillar to post without picking up a thing or two," and Tubbs winked, mysteriously.

Talbot saw that the man was case-hardened in folly, and words would only be wasted upon him.

"Oh, I tell you, I'm the right bower of that institution now!" the comedian continued, "but, that ain't what I came to talk about. The fact is, Mr. Talbot, ever since the night when you came to the front and cleared out that ugly crowd, I have been anxious to express my thanks to you; your pains are registered where every day I turn the leaf to read them."

"Don't mention it; it's all right."

"But, it is not all right, sir; me heart is touched! I kin not, I will not know peace until the load is removed!" the actor persisted. "That you, Mr. Talbot, bold Richard Talbot of Cinnabar, should step forward—go in lemons and get squeezed—for me—why, it was one of the strangest things that could have happened."

Talbot surveyed the speaker in questioning surprise.

"I don't exactly understand what you mean; I don't see anything particularly strange about it."

"Aha! the inside history of this strange and fearful tale you knew not!" the comedian exclaimed, in a melo-dramatic whisper. "You knew not me—you knew not that, in the land of the living, J. Lysander Tubbs stood a breathing man; but I knew you!"

"Yes," and Talbot did not manifest any surprise at this information.

"In fact, hearing that you were up here was one of the principal reasons why I hid trunk in my clothes I wore, and I needed to be this valley!"

"Because I was here?"

"Yes; don't you see my little game?"

"Indeed I do not."

"But, I didn't expect to find you in your own proper person."

"How did you expect to find me?"

"Lurking under some disguise, and my little game was to make a stake out of you."

"Make a stake out of me how? I don't understand at all. This is all Greek to me!" and Talbot grew impatient.

"Why, I was going to let the cat out of the bag—I was going to tell the miners who you were and what you had done, unless you came down with the dust! See? what a splendid idea it was! Blackmail, of course! I knew that you wouldn't like it to get round; I don't s'pose the men would care much, but those two angelic creatures in the house yonder—wouldn't it make them jest open their eyes if they only knew what sort of a life you had led, and how all California had rung with your name from one end to the other? You see, I got all posted up about you; I was going to make a play out of it. I thought that such a drama would hit the popular taste. And to think, after I had got this little thing all cut and dried, that you were the first man to step forward and give me a lift!"

Talbot's face was a study as the comedian unfolded his wonderful plan, but Tubbs never noticed it; he was too eager in his recital, and by the time that he had finished his speech the face of the miner had become like marble again.

"My dear friend Tubbs," he said, quietly and kindly, laying his hand upon the shoulder of the other, "you are about the greenest man that I ever saw. If you really know me—if you know what my life has been in the past, wild and desperate, a man who has been a social outcast—a hunted fugitive, fleeing for his life, compelled to herd with the red-skins, and who at one time knew that every white face he looked upon was the face of a foe—do you imagine for a single moment that such a man could be blackmailed?"

Tubbs's under jaw dropped; he had never looked upon the matter in this light before; with that overweening confidence so natural to him he had looked upon the matter as being easily accomplished.

"Why, if I cared anything about the thing at all," Talbot continued, "and you had come to me and attempted to make me buy your silence, I would have laughed at you."

"You would?" cried the comedian, amazed.

"Most certainly; and I would have told you in the quietest way in the world that, if you dared to open your mouth in regard to me, I would as surely as you are a living man put a bullet through your heart the very next time I met you."

Tubbs became decidedly uneasy. "But I wouldn't do it, you know!" he hastened to declare. "Wild horses couldn't tear your secret from me now, you know—not after the noble way in which you came to my assistance the other night."

"Oh, I'm not at all afraid of it," Talbot assured, carelessly. "Not that I care much; though. With my past life no one has aught to do; the law now has no claim upon me; and as for the men in this Camp, from what I have seen of them, I reckon it wouldn't make much difference to them if the biggest rascal that ever escaped a white jail came and settled in this valley."

"Yes, but that divine heifer yonder; 'Angels were painted fair to look like her!'" Mr. Tubbs remarked, poetically, and he nodded toward the house.

"Well, as far as Miss Jones is concerned, I don't believe that she troubles her head much about me."

The showman detected the evasion at once, for in matters of this sort he was nobody's fool.

"Aha! Touch me not so nearly, me noble lord! It is not the Jones of Angels, although as a maid she is surpassing fair! It is the other—the general's daughter! 'She loved me for the dangers that I had passed, and I loved her that she did pity them!'"

"Tubbs, you talk altogether too much, and if you don't keep your tongue more under control, you will be sure to get into trouble," Talbot warned, quietly but very significantly.

The comedian was always on the alert, and even if he did not comprehend, he always pretended that he did; so on this occasion he laid his finger alongside of his nose and winked in the most knowing manner possible.

"All right, great marquis; I'm fly! J. L. Tubbs, Esquire, the Arkansaw pet, is always up to snuff! Well, take care of yourself. If you need anything, you know where to come. Adieu, over-the-river!"

And the actor sauntered away, as light-hearted a vagabond as ever stepped foot on Californian soil, and that is saying a great deal, for the Pacific slope has always been the paradise of ne'er-do-wells.

Talbot looked after Tubbs in a thoughtful manner.

"That fellow is sure to turn up again in some

unguarded moment!" he murmured. "He's too big a fool to hold his tongue, even with the best intentions in the world. And, since it must out, I'll take time by the forelock and have the first crack."

And the opportunity was fated to come sooner than Richard Talbot expected.

CHAPTER XXI.

BIG WHITE ROCK.

ABOUT a mile above the location of the Camp, right by the bank of the river, was a peculiar boulder that rose abruptly out of the earth, of mammoth size, about as big as a good two-storied house, and being quite light in color, set off, as it was, by a background of dark pines, it was not remarkable that it was generally known as the big white rock.

Surface indications of gold were pretty strong around the rock and a mine had been started on the south side, but had been speedily abandoned, and now nothing but a big pit remained to tell of the time and money spent, and already the careful hand of old Mother Nature had commenced, with trailing vines and springing bushes, to remove the traces of man's destroying hand.

The vicinity of the big white rock was a lonely spot at any time, and more particularly after night had set in, for the trail that led up along the bank of the river was rarely used except by the wandering red-skin, or the almost equally wild white hunter. There were no mines up the streams, although there had been a deal of prospecting done up in that direction during the early days of the settlement, but, not a single paying claim had been found.

At the Candle-box mine the golden store had ceased, apparently, for no paying lode above that famous claim had ever been developed.

The night was not very dark; there was a moon; but at times the fleeting clouds veiled its light.

At half-past seven there were five men gathered in the narrow trail, hardly discernible on the surface of the prairie, for the Klamath river at this point ran through a wide stretch of open bottom land, two or three miles in extent, only broken here and there by big boulders and stunted, scattered clumps of pines.

Five men, and all on mischief bent.

There was Klamath John, the brawny, saturnine hunter; Kanaka Bill, once the bully of the Camp, until Dick Talbot had mastered him; Jockey Joe, Bill's "pardner," so called because he was reputed to have stolen more horses than any other two men on the Pacific slope; the bold McCracken and Randolph Blair, the bonanza king, completed the party.

The group had not come from the town in one body, but in two separate parties, the miners forming one, and the strangers the other, but at the big white rock they had come together.

All five looked around them carefully, and then they nodded, as if to express their satisfaction, for a finer place to execute the purpose on which they had come could not be found.

"Now, gents," explained Blair, after the party had met and completed the silent inspection, "I told you that I would show you the spot where a certain party will come about eight o'clock; and, not to beat about the bush, he has got an appointment with a woman here at that hour, so he is pretty sure to come. Who that woman is, I don't think it is necessary to mention."

The dark face of Klamath John grew darker still; he guessed easily enough who the woman was, as the wily speculator expected and intended that he would.

"Oh, to blazes with the woman!" Kanaka Bill exclaimed, coarsely; "we don't care nothin' 'bout her, nohow!"

Klamath John said not a word, but the way in which his strong right hand gripped the handle of his revolver, spoke volumes.

"You, gentlemen, have got a little account to settle with this man," Blair continued. "It's no business of mine, of course, but I thought that, after what happened the other night, it was possible you were all hankering after a chance to get even with him."

"Oh, you bet!" exclaimed Bill, fiercely.

The smart of their wounds still lingered in their memory.

"Of course," as McCracken hastened to say, "we've had no quarrel with the man; it don't matter the weight of a straw to us whether he lives or dies; but meself, and me friend, are goin' to try a little speculation up in this country, do ye mind, and, maybe, we'll want some good min about your size, so if we help you now, by giving you a chance to get even wid this party, you must return the compliment when we want it."

"Certainly; that's only fair!" assented John.

"Squar' as a die!" Kanaka added.

"Couldn't be squarer, no way you could fix it!" Joe remarked. All apparently accepted the Irishman's statement as truth, and yet, as they were no fools, one and all knew that these two men who had taken so much pains to compass the death of Richard Talbot, were not doing so without a powerful motive.

Talbot of Cinnabar, in some manner, was in their way; and they were determined to settle

him from it. But it was no business of theirs, so long as they got a chance to get even with him.

"Well, gents, that's all," Blair concluded. "It is about time for your man to come, so my friend and myself will get out of the way. We'll take reserved seats somewhere hereabouts so that we can have a good view of the fun."

Thus coolly did the speculator refer to the death of the man who had never injured him in any way.

"All right; and we'll to cover," Klamath John replied; "and you can bet your bottom dollar this man don't walk back to the Camp if he comes to this rock to-night."

"Will you go for him the moment you see him?" Blair asked, a little curious as to the programme of the other.

"No; I have a curiosity in regard to the woman," the other answered, in a quiet tone, but with a deal of savage meaning in it.

"He may get impatient and not wait for her," suggested Blair, fearful that the scheme might miscarry. He had not told the fellows of the trick that had been played with the letter, as an afterthought had suggested that perhaps the hunter would be more eager for vengeance if he thought he could wreak it on the woman also.

"We will place ourselves in ambush between the rock and the Camp; then if he attempts to return, either with or without the woman, we will finish him," the hunter announced.

"All right; so-long!"

The desperadoes stole to a little clump of timber within easy revolver range of the rock, and after seeing the others safely hid Blair and McCracken proceeded to stow themselves away in a little thicket of pines by the bank of the river.

"Do you think he will walk into the trap all right?" asked Blair, as he stretched himself out at full length by the side of the Irishman under the shelter of the spreading pines.

"Shure! Why shouldn't he? What's to hinder?"

"He might suspect something wrong."

"Oh, divil a fear of that!" McCracken asseverated, confidently. "Besides, Talbot is one of them reckless dare-devils that don't know what fear is. He thinks himself a match for a dozen."

"He's a bully and a desperado!" Blair exclaimed, contemptuously. "I've seen a good many men of his stamp, and I never saw one of them yet that couldn't be backed down when the right man took hold of the job."

"Maybe you have a liking that way?" suggested McCracken, slyly.

"Well, I tell you what it is, Mac, I shouldn't be afraid to face him either with my fists or with a weapon," the bonanza king replied, carelessly. "You see, Mac, I am about as good a boxer as you can scare up in this country. I took a six months' course of lessons from the best professional pugilist that ever came to Frisco, and I rather flatter myself that it would bother this fellow to stand up against me, smart as he thinks himself; and then, when you come to the revolver, I have made fifty bull's-eyes off-hand."

"For all that, me boy, if you'll take my advice, you'll be after letting these gentlemen yonder do all the fighting; it's more in their line, you know."

"Well, Mac, I'll own that I would like to get one crack at him!" and Blair's look betrayed his earnestness.

"I wouldn't, unless both his hands were tied. I tell ye, Mr. Blair, he's an ugly man to handle!"

"Another reason, too, why I concluded that you and I had better come and see this affair through: if we are on the ground here, armed and ready, we may be able to turn the tide of the fight if it should happen to go against our friends yonder, and you never can tell, you know, about these matters. He thrashed the three of them in a fair fight the other night, and if by any unlucky accident he should happen to discover them before they can get a good chance at him, why, he might be able to worry them again."

"True for yees!" McCracken assented; "and if such a thing should happen, why, maybe we'd be after getting a chance to pepper him."

"Exactly so; but do you know I never shot a man yet in my life," Blair added. "I have killed almost all kinds of game, but I never bagged a human."

"Maybe you will to-night."

"Well, I shouldn't be surprised; I'm going to take a crack at him, anyway, just for the fun of the thing. I don't know exactly how it is, but I've taken a terrible dislike to this fellow."

"Faix! I'll be after betting yees a hundred dollars to tin that ye'll niver git the control of the Candle-box mine while he has anything to do with it!"

"We'll settle him to-night! If they don't, I will!"

"Hush! here he comes!" the Irishman cried, cautiously.

And, sure enough, up along the trail at a ra-

pid pace came the man who had been thus coolly doomed to death—Dick Talbot of Cinnabar.

CHAPTER XXII.

ONE WHO WAS NOT EXPECTED.

KLAMATH JOHN and his gang perceived the approach of the man for whom they lay in wait even before Blair and McCracken.

John, who had the eyes of a hawk and the ears of a fox, was the first to notice Talbot's approach.

"Lay low, boys," he cautioned; "hyer comes our game."

With bated breath the desperadoes kept close and eager watch.

Talbot came on rapidly, not totally unsuspecting of danger, for the wild life he had led had made caution a second nature to him; and so, as he advanced, his quick, keen eyes scanned every clump of timber, every massive bowlder, every little hollow of the ground, as though, Indian-like, he expected to behold a foe lurking wherever a foe might find room to conceal himself.

But he did not think that danger threatened; it was but the force of habit to keep his eyes ever on the alert.

So closely concealed, though, were the ambushed men that even Talbot's keen eyes did not detect them.

"No gal!" muttered Kanaka Bill in the ear of Klamath, as Talbot advanced and it was perceived that he was alone.

"She will come soon," the chief of the party replied.

"Molly Missouri, I s'pose?" Jockey Joe whispered.

"What woman else?" John observed, in a savage tone.

"Well, if she does come?" Bill questioned.

"She comes to her death," the chief answered, coldly.

"Settle her, then?"

"Yes, the same as we do him."

"The Happy Palace will go bu'st, then; a chance for some feller to step in and make a stake."

"The girl has had fair warning, and if she comes to meet this fellow to-night, she comes to her death!" Klamath John exclaimed.

By this time Talbot had passed by the two ambushes and had halted in front of the rock.

And now, to their disgust, both of the concealed parties perceived that the man whom they intended to assassinate was in no very great danger so long as he kept in front of the rock where he was now standing.

True, he was within easy revolver range, but the night was not so clear as it might be, and although both Blair and the desperadoes were pretty good pistol shots, yet it would require a master marksman to be certain of hitting the victim in a vital spot at such a distance and under such circumstances.

"It is further than I thought," muttered the chief of the desperadoes. "We must not risk an attack until he comes near us on his return. Mind! we have got to hit him, boys, and hit him hard, too, or it may cost some of us our lives. We cannot fool with this fellow. He flaxed us the last time in a fair fight, and we must not give him a chance for his life this time if we can help it."

The other two fully agreed with John. There wasn't the slightest disposition to underrate the prowess of the superintendent on the part of these men; they had tested his metal before and weighed him well.

Talbot was in a quandary in regard to the message; he couldn't imagine what the girl wanted with him, but he had not the slightest suspicion of treachery. He had questioned the negro in regard to who had brought the letter, but all that Ginger could tell him was that it had been delivered by a boy, and a "sassy" one, too, and Ginger had volunteered to hunt the boy up and had started out for that purpose, but, up to the time of the superintendent's departure from the mine, he had not returned.

Talbot was not impatient upon discovering that the girl had not arrived, for he concluded she had not calculated correctly regarding the distance the rock was from the town, and the time she would have to take on the passage.

But he had not occupied his position ten minutes when he saw a dark figure hurrying forward in the dim, uncertain light, coming up the trail from the direction of the Camp.

"The girl is more prompt than I imagined she would be," he murmured, as the dark-robed form came rapidly toward him.

It was a female, sure enough, and wrapped from head to foot in a dark cloak that completely hid the figure.

"Good-evening, Miss Molly! I didn't exactly know what to make of this letter; I feared there might be some trick in it," Talbot remarked, as the dark form came up to him.

"And so there is, Mr. Talbot," answered a woman's voice, but not the voice that he expected to hear.

It was the lady of the Candle-box mine, Desdemona Cadwalader, and not Molly Missouri of the Happy Palace!

The mine manager was completely taken by surprise, for he had not had the slightest suspicion of the truth.

"Miss Cadwalader! is it possible?" he exclaimed.

For answer she pushed the cloak away from her face so that he could distinguish her pale, beautiful features.

"Yes, it is I!" she said, hurriedly. "Mr. Talbot, you are threatened by a terrible danger. If I understood your words correctly when I approached, you addressed me as Miss Molly."

"Yes," replied Talbot, who began to feel that he was in a somewhat awkward position, "I thought you were the young woman who keeps the hotel, the Happy Palace, Miss Molly Missouri. I received a note from her this afternoon asking me to meet her here to-night, as she had something important to communicate."

"I know—I know!" Desdemona answered, hurriedly. "Ginger brought the note to me when it came this afternoon, and I sent it to you. Of course I was ignorant of its contents. Mr. Talbot, that note was a decoy; I am satisfied of it; the girl never penned it, and you have been lured to this lonely spot in order to place you in the power of your enemies."

A rapid, searching glance, Talbot cast around him, even as the girl was speaking, but the ambushed men were too cunningly concealed to be detected by the keen, half-Indian eyes of the searcher.

"About twenty minutes before you left the mill," the lady continued, "I was by the wall of the stockade, planting some wild flowers I had found on the river's bank. Some men passed on the outside, and, as they passed, one exclaimed, 'The decoy letter will fetch him there to-night, and then the fellows who are in waiting for him will finish him, beyond a doubt.'"

"And did you recognize the voice?" Talbot asked, deeply interested, and still keeping an earnest, searching watch around him.

"I—I think I did, but, in such a case as this, I would not like to be positive," she replied, evidently embarrassed. "At first I gave no heed to the words; they did not seem to concern any one that I knew, and I did not trouble myself about them. But then, after supper I saw you go out, and as you left the works and turned, not toward the town, but from it, the sentence I had overheard flashed suddenly into my head; and then, too, at the same time, I remembered the letter you had received that very afternoon. I can't exactly explain how it was, but the idea at once came to me that the words I had overheard had reference to you; that the letter you had received was the decoy letter the man mentioned, and that you were being lured to your death. I felt that that there was no time to be lost; my father had gone out; I did not dare trust any one to warn you, for I felt that I was not competent to tell friend from foe, so I threw on my cloak and ran after you myself. Mr. Talbot, I am aware that it is not the most ladylike act in the world, but more like the freak of a giddy girl, yet I felt that a human life was perhaps at stake, and so you must forget the act and remember only the motive."

Talbot was deeply affected. In his own mind there was no doubt that he had been entrapped, and, although he could not see his foes, he felt sure they were not far off, and that some of the quiet and innocent clumps of pines hid those who had red murder written on their hearts.

"Miss Cadwalader," he said, earnestly, "in all my life to come I shall never forget the service you have rendered me this night, for I feel sure you have rendered me a service which will tax me to my utmost to repay."

"But, why is your life sought?"

"Perhaps by the men with whom I fought the other night."

"It was not one of those whom I overheard, but, if I am not mistaken, and I do not think I am, a man who is an utter stranger to you—who cannot possibly have any cause to wish to do you harm."

"Ah, you don't know that, miss!" the manager exclaimed. "I am the master-spirit of your father's mine; the lode is a rich one; there may be a dozen men who think if they can get me out, they can twist the property out of your father's hands, for up in this region, Miss Desdemona, almost the only law is the law of the strong arm. There are some parties in the background who are after this mine; they have been after it ever since it was opened, and, so far, they have succeeded in breaking up every man who has tried to run it; now, it is the same old game over again."

"But, they will not succeed? they will not, surely, be able to rob my father of his property?" the girl asked, anxiously.

"No, miss, not while I live."

It was, perhaps, a boastful speech, and yet it did not sound so, coming from his lips.

There was a strange look in the beautiful, clear eyes of the girl, and she held out her hand impulsively to him.

"I believe you will fight for us to the death, Mr. Talbot!" she exclaimed, earnestly.

"I will, miss; I'll stand by the mine while life remains," he replied, taking the proffered hand.

When Blair beheld this action it was more than he could stand; he had been greatly amazed at the appearance of the girl, whom he fancied he recognized despite the cloak she wore.

"By Jove! it is she!" he cried, leaping to his feet; "I am certain of it! The artful hussy! I'll tear that cloak from her face!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

BLAIR TO THE FRONT.

"WHIST, ye devil!" cried McCracken, alarmed; "what are ye about?" and he seized hold of Blair's coat as he spoke.

But the blood of the bonanza king was up, and he tore himself away from the Irishman's grasp.

"Don't you see it is the confounded jade?" he cried, wild with rage. "She turns up her nose at me, Randolph Blair, who is able to buy her and all her tribe, and runs after this ruffianly desperado; but I'll thrash him, though, right before her eyes. I'll show him and her that I am his better, every way."

"Will ye be quiet and not spile my illigant game?" demanded McCracken, in disgust.

But, he might as well have attempted to stay a mad bull in his wild rush by simple expostulation as to turn Blair from his purpose.

The bonanza king was incensed beyond endurance. He thought that he recognized the girl, and it was a terrible blow to his pride when he reflected how coldly she had always received his advances, and now beheld her tender her hand, apparently unsolicited, to the mining superintendent whom she had stolen forth to meet in disguise and under the cover of the night.

He was eager to avenge the affront, and the quickest way he thought would be to force Talbot into a personal encounter. With all his shrewd coolness Blair was a hot-headed fellow enough when his temper was up, and, despite the evidence of Talbot's prowess which he had already received, he was fully confident that he had strength and skill enough to give his rival a thrashing, and so humiliate him in the presence of the woman, the bone of contention.

McCracken was aghast. He could hardly bring himself to believe that Blair would be guilty of such an act of folly, but he was speedily convinced that even the wisest and most long-headed of mankind, under the influence of the green-eyed monster, Jealousy, could cast to the winds all idea of prudence.

"I'll teach him a lesson!" Blair repeated, as he strode out of the little clump of timber and advanced directly toward the two standing in the opening.

"The big idiot—he'll get the fore-front of his beautiful face spiled!" McCracken muttered. "And now that Talbot is on his guard, it's ten to one that we don't fetch him."

Klamath John and his gang were astounded by Blair's unexpected action, and for a moment they hardly knew what to make of it, but it was not long before the shrewd wits of the chief solved the riddle.

"He's jealous, boys, I reckon," John remarked; "he's got some sort of a claim on this heifer and he's going to have it out with his rival."

"Well, he may be able to clean him out," Kanaka remarked, "but if he does I'm a Dutchman!"

"I'll go two to one on Talbot!" Jockey Joe offered.

These bold fighting men had already tested the might and the weight of the Candle-box man and they had a wholesome respect for him. The man who had in single fight, fair and square and in every way above-board, whipped three of the best men that had ever struck the upper Klamath river was not likely to have his scalp taken by this Frisco chap.

Blair's movement naturally had attracted the attention of the man and woman who were holding such close converse.

Talbot had grasped his pistols and Desdemona had drawn the hood of her cloak over her face, in great alarm.

"Oh, some one is coming!" she cried, horror-stricken at the very idea. "For heaven's sake do not let me be recognized, or my good name will be stained forever."

"Don't be alarmed, miss; there is not the slightest danger!" Talbot hastened to say. He had discovered who the new-comer was the moment he had stepped out of the shelter of the pines, and he was somewhat astonished, too, at perceiving that he was alone. He had expected to see the bonanza king backed by a cohort of desperadoes.

Blair came straight on, his face flushed and his whole manner plainly indicating that he was in a desperate rage.

Then for the first time the truth flashed upon Talbot: This speculator from the Golden Gate had two objects in visiting the little mining-camp on the Klamath river: he was not only after the Candle-box mine, but after the fair daughter of the man who owned the mine.

Talbot understood, too, the mistake under

which the wily speculator labored. The peculiar circumstances attending his meeting with the girl had led Blair to believe that he had witnessed a lovers' tryst.

But, as the other came rapidly onward, in such hostile guise, Talbot laughed; if Blair intended to force a quarrel upon him, before it was ended the Frisco sharp would be a wiser and a sorer man, the manager of the mine believed.

He stepped forward a pace and Desdemona shrunk behind him. The girl was terribly alarmed at the position in which she had so unwittingly placed herself.

"Here, you fellow!" exclaimed the Frisco sharp, when he got within speaking distance, "I will relieve you of the care of that lady!"

"No, no!" cried Desdemona, in Talbot's ear, in great alarm, "do not; I should die of shame. Oh, this is terrible!"

"Don't be alarmed, miss, I beg of you; there is not the slightest danger," reassuringly.

"Here you, don't you understand the English language when you hear it?" Blair cried, insolently, halting within five or six feet of the couple and purposely making himself as ugly as possible.

"Bah! you booby! You're talking too loud and too much!" Talbot exclaimed. "I've known bigger men than you to catch cold by opening their mouth so wide."

The cool response fairly maddened Blair.

"You infernal blackguard!" he cried, with upraised hand, the fist clenched in menace; "do you know who you are talking to?"

"Talking to you, you great mule; and I'm your master, too, do you understand that, though I am neither a Frisco sharp nor a bonanza king?"

This prompt, defiant reply and the cool manner in which it was uttered, for a moment staggered Blair, despite the terrible rage that inflamed his heart, but he recovered himself quickly.

"Stand aside! I want to speak to that lady."

"She doesn't reciprocate the want!" Talbot answered, at once. "She chooses her own associates."

"I want to see if I know her!"

"I don't care two cents what you want; she don't want to know you; so be off about your business."

"I must—I will see that woman's face!" the irate man persisted.

Desdemona shrunk in terror away, but Talbot, with a single motion of his hand, restrained her, at the same time that he faced Blair undauntedly.

For a moment the two men stood and looked each other fairly in the eye. The bonanza king fierce with rage, the miner determined but as cool as ice.

"I'll give you five minutes to get out of here!" Blair said, in a voice trembling with fury, and drawing back his right arm as if to prepare to deal a heavy blow.

"You might give me ten and I won't go! If you mean business, and want to fight, come on; I have hammered many a better man than you are, you humbug!"

"You scoundrel!" and with the word, unable longer to restrain his rage, Blair sprang forward and dealt a quick and powerful blow full at Talbot's face; but, Injun Dick's hands had not forgotten their cunning; he was on his guard and parried the stroke, then followed half a dozen blows, given and warded with skill, but Talbot was only *playing* with his antagonist; waiting for an "opening" to deal a stroke that would count.

It came soon, too. Blair was quickly winded by the unusual exertion, and as he paused for a moment to catch his breath he unconsciously dropped his guard, and the terrible right hand of Dick Talbot shot forward with the quickness almost of the lightning, and the iron-like knuckles catching Blair on the left cheek right under the eye with a whip-like crack, that resounded like the report of a small six-shooter, seemed fairly to lift the Frisco speculator from his feet, and hurled him backward with terrific force.

Down came Blair upon his back with a "thud" that seemed to shake the very earth. His head and shoulders received the weight of the shock, and after he struck he hardly moved, but stared upward, with straining eyes, at the sky, as though the single stroke had hurried him at once to the dead man's doom.

The single blow had ended the fight.

A deep, long-drawn breath came from all the men concealed amid the pines as they noted the terrible effect of the blow. No one of them all ever had seen a more powerful stroke. Was Talbot, then, a man of iron, that, giant-like, he overcame his foes so easily?

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE BLOOD-RED HAND AGAIN.

"Is he dead?" Desdemona cried, in horror.

"Oh, no, miss; merely had the fight knocked out of him, that is all," Talbot explained; "he will recover in five or six minutes, and although

he may not be as handsome as he was before, yet he will know a great deal more." There was a deal of quiet sarcasm in this, for even the conqueror was somewhat astonished at his speedy victory. "But come, miss, allow me to escort you home," he continued.

"But, is there no danger that this man will die if we leave him here alone?" she asked, anxiously. "We must temper victory with mercy, you know."

"No, not the least danger in the world; besides, miss, it is almost certain that he was not alone. A lion of his kind is seldom without a jackal; the other is hiding somewhere in the bushes." Then he whipped out one of his revolvers and pointed toward the little clump of pine from whence Blair had emerged. "Come out of there!" he exclaimed, "or I'll try the effect of a few bullets upon you."

The promptitude with which Mr. McCracken made his appearance was wonderful.

"Don't fire, Mister Talbot; don't fire for the world!" shouted the Irishman, holding up both hands in deprecation. "Don't waste your powder! there's not the last taste of reason in life for it! Powder costs money and lead is expensive, and I beg to assure you, upon me honor as a gentleman, that I have the greatest possible respect for you."

McCracken was greatly alarmed for he was not of a warlike nature.

"You are in no danger, sir. Attend to your friend here, and if he is not satisfied with what he has received he knows where to come for more," and then Talbot offered his arm to the general's daughter. "If you will allow me," he said, gallantly.

Klamath John and his gang had kept close watch upon the scene, and now they were prepared to take a hand in the affair.

Desdemona was upon Talbot's left arm; their place of ambush was on his right; so that they had a fair chance at him as he passed by, although there was great danger that, if they missed Talbot they would hit the girl.

"It is a risky business!" Kanaka Bill muttered. "It'll be just our luck to plug the gal."

"We must run the risk!" Klamath John exclaimed, sternly. "This man must die! It is a duel to the death between him and us; if we don't finish him, then we'll have to emigrate or he will finish us."

"Oh, the gal must take her chances," Jockey Joe put in, philosophically. "Anyhow, thank a heap of women in this world—a durned sight too many sometimes, as I've found out afore now; wimen don't do much but make mischief, no how you kin fix it."

And so the attempt being decided upon, with cocked and leveled revolvers the gang waited for the two to pass them.

But, as many a time before has been said, man proposes and fate disposes.

Dame Fortune in her wisdom had ruled that neither Talbot nor the girl should act as targets for Klamath John and his band, that night.

An unlooked-for event occurred that completely upset the scheme of the ambushed men.

A tall form, looking almost gigantic in the darkness, came hurrying along up the trail from the town, and at the heels of the human followed another shadow, quite a little one, that flitted here and there in an extremely restless manner.

It was the negro Ginger Blue, and his little cur dog—a worthless "yaller pup," but on this occasion the yellow dog proved himself to be an extremely valuable animal.

As the dog came racing on over the prairie he scented the humans concealed within the little clump of pine, and dog-like he immediately bounded toward the timber and commenced to yelp as though a legion of wild animals were concealed therein.

Ginger had a great deal of faith and a great belief in the hunting qualities of the animal. In his opinion there wasn't another such a dog in all California.

"Dar's a rabbit or a 'coon in dar!" he cried, as the dog commenced to yelp and circle toward the clump of trees. "Sic 'em, Napoleon, sic 'em, Nap, good dog! Go fur 'em!" and Ginger drew his revolver, ready to draw a bead on the fleeing game when the dog should force it into the opening.

The game of Klamath John and his gang was up. All chance of a surprise was gone, for Talbot, attracted by the yelping of the dog, had at once guessed that no beasts but humans were concealed within the pines, and therefore he had immediately drawn his revolver and prepared for action.

The three concealed men knew that, if they remained, they would soon be in a tight place. The negro was advancing toward them; Talbot was on his guard and they felt that they stood but a sorry chance if they endeavored to encounter both men.

The golden opportunity had vanished; there was no hope of getting a crack at Talbot, and so concluding that discretion was the better part of valor, they rose to their feet and fled to the westward toward the foothills of the mountains, at break-neck speed.

The astonishment of the negro was wonderful. With staring eyes, saucer-like in their di-

mensions, he stood stock still and glared after the runaways.

"What's dem, anyhow, ghostesses?" he cried, amazed.

Talbot was not surprised; he had expected such an event to happen, but he turned instantly to the Irishman.

"Is this some of your work?" he cried, sternly.

McCracken had knelt down by the side of the prostrate and senseless Blair, loosened his necktie, and was endeavoring to restore him.

The Irishman was dreadfully alarmed, for he felt guilty, but as a lie had often served his purpose in an emergency, he resorted to one now.

"Be the holy poker, Mr. Talbot, I swear to yees that I know nothing at all, at all about it!" he protested. "I came for a walk with Mr. Blair, and we were a-sitting down yonder by the river whin you kem up, but, as for these other fellers, I know no more of them than a child unborn."

A look of contempt appeared upon Talbot's face, but he knew that it was useless to waste words upon such a vagabond, and so he contented himself with a brief caution:

"I think that you are lying, and I begin to believe that you and your crowd really are in earnest in this thing, and so I give you fair warning that hereafter, if I am attacked, I shall fight to kill. If blood is shed, be the evil on the heads of those who force me to the deed."

Then he turned away, gave his arm to the lady and they advanced toward the negro, who was still gazing in wondering astonishment in the direction that the fleeing men had gone.

The approach of the two roused him from his abstraction.

"Is dat you, Massa Talbot?" he asked; he did not recognize the girl in the dark cloak, so closely had she drawn the hood over her face.

"Yes; what are you doing up here?"

"Arter you, sah."

"What do you want with me?"

As they conversed, they all walked down the trail toward the town.

"Dar's a heap of trouble down at de mine sah, and de old man sent me arter you. I see'd you when you went out to-night, and as I see'd you come up dis way, I come arter you. Say, Massa Talbot, did you see dem big t'ings run out of de bushes? What was dey?"

"Men laying in wait to get a crack at me, I reckon," Talbot replied; "and I owe you one—or rather the dog, for I could not otherwise have told where they were, and they might have been able to wing me as I passed by them; that, evidently, was their intention."

"Men! By golly! I thought dey war spooks, and dat's w'at I couldn't git through my ha'r, how de dog dared to run arter dem."

"But, what is the matter at the mine, Ginger?"

"Some low, mean white man has done gone and stuck up a bill on de tree, jes' outside de stockade, and de general, when he see'd it, he sed as how it war a game for to frighten de men out ob de works. Dar's a big red hand on it."

"Oho!" Talbot exclaimed; "our friend of the blood-red hand has turned up again, then? I thought we had got rid of him, for we haven't heard anything of him since we commenced to run the mill."

"Deed, Massa Talbot, he's come ag'in for sure. De ole man war mighty worried, I tell yer, and he done wanted me to start right off arter you."

"What is the meaning of this dreadful sign, and why does any one wish harm to my father, who has never harmed any one?" Desdemona asked, anxiously.

"Miss, this is a wild land, with little law and much license," Talbot answered. "Your father should never have come to such a country; he is utterly unfitted to cope with the men with whom he must contend; but, as to this blood-red hand, I will own, frankly, I do not know exactly what to make of it, although I have lived quite a number of years in these wild mining-camps; but, from this time forth, I will use my best endeavors to solve the mystery, and I will solve it, though I peril life in the attempt."

"You are very kind," the girl murmured, a touch of melancholy in her tones.

Talbot felt that she was beginning to think a little better of him than she yet had done.

Soon they arrived at the mine; the girl hastened into the house, and Talbot proceeded to examine the mysterious warning.

It was simple enough. A big blood-red hand in the center of a sheet of paper, and across its center a scroll, which said:

"Death to all who dare to work in the Candle-box mine!"

CHAPTER XXV.

A JEALOUS WOMAN.

PROMPTLY at the appointed time Molly arrived at the place of meeting, the big white rock. By just about five minutes she had missed encountering Talbot and his companions, but at the rock she did find the bonanza king and the Irishman.

As Talbot had said, Blair was not seriously hurt, although, as McCracken declared, he had a head on him as big as a bushel-basket.

Blair felt pretty sore over his defeat, both physically and mentally; and here again Talbot was right. The Frisco sharp did know more than he could boast of before, but he had not at all improved in beauty.

"Curse the fellow!" Blair muttered, in deep disgust, as McCracken tied up his face in a handkerchief. "I wouldn't have believed that a man could hit so. Why, I was knocked as senseless as though I had been kicked by a horse!"

"Oh, he's a divil, sur—a born divil!" McCracken exclaimed. "I tould ye not to try it on, but you would. Shure! a willful man must have his own way!"

"I'll be even with him, though, if it costs me every dollar I have in the world!" Blair growled.

At this point Molly arrived, meeting the two as they began their walk toward the town.

McCracken when he saw the girl coming at once darted forward to intercept her.

"He's been here and gone, me darlint," he exclaimed. "He made a mistake about the hour. He thought that it was eight instead of nine, and he would have waited but the gurl came after him and so he went with her."

"Girl? What girl?" cried Molly, up in arms in a moment.

"Why, you know! Shure! there's only one gurl that's set her cap for Mister Talbot," the Irishman cunningly insinuated.

"She had better look out or she will get into trouble!" Molly retorted, her anger so inflamed by the words that she forgot the dictates of prudence.

"It's a burning shame, me beauty," the Irishman added, soothingly, at the same time trying to find words that would be certain to excite the girl's jealousy. "Small credit is it for the likes of her to be running about the town after a man that wouldn't be after caring two pins for her if she would l'ave him alone. But, it's the old story over ag'in: she do have money and you've got none. If she was on an aqual footing, sorra a chance would she have at all, at all."

"Hang it!" cried Molly, in hot anger. "I'll just lay for her and give her a piece of my mind!" And then she flounced about and marched back toward the mining-camp.

McCracken chuckled in high delight.

Blair advanced and joined him.

"L'ave me alone to pull the wires!" the Irishman cried. "I've put a flea in Molly's ear and she will not rest quiet now."

"What did you say to her?" Blair inquired.

"Excited her jealousy ag'in' the other gurl. Oh, she's a fighter, she is; a reg'lar wild-cat! I tell you what it is, Mister Blair, it is in that gurl to take a knife and wipe out the ginerals daughter wid wan lick."

"By Jove! I hope that she won't do that!" the speculator exclaimed, in alarm. "That little operation would materially interfere with my plans. If she would only wipe out the man now."

The Irishman shook his head.

"It's a foine bye I am to plan, but ye're asking too much of me now."

The further conversation of the two as they walked toward the Camp was of little interest. Blair felt sore both in body and mind, and McCracken, with all his boastings, was obliged to admit that he could at present devise no plan to circumvent Richard Talbot of Cinnabar!

But the words he had spoken to the girl-hostess of the Happy Palace produced a deeper impression even than he had suspected.

Molly brooded and brooded over the affair, becoming strangely glum and unsociable, much to the discouragement of the great American Comedian, Tubbs, from Arkansas, whose efforts to amuse the lady, who had so generously taken him under her wing, were not appreciated half as much as they had been.

For some three days Molly meditated over the matter, then she made up her mind to see the "stuck-up thing," as she indignantly denominated the fair Desdemona, and "have it out with her."

And so, as vigilantly as a cat on the watch for the night-marauding mouse, Molly kept her eyes open for the chance to secure a few moments' speech with the woman whom she looked upon as a rival.

True, she could have gone at once to the Candle-box mine, where an interview with the general's daughter could be had for the asking, but this was a good deal like bearding the lion in his den, and angry and jealous as Molly was, she instinctively shrunk from this course of action, for Talbot was there and not for worlds would she have him know that she was quarreling with another girl on his account.

So Molly watched for the opportunity to accost Miss Cadwalader when she should go abroad, and chance soon afforded Molly the occasion she sought.

Late one afternoon, just as the sun was sinking in the west, Molly happening to look out of the rear door of her "hotel" detected two female figures high up on the rocky hillside, about two miles to the west of the Camp.

The girl had eyes like a hawk, and although the figures were far off she was certain that they

were the two girls of the Candle-box mine. So her resolve was soon taken; she could easily intercept them on their way to the Camp and amid the lonely wilderness of the foot-hills, she would have a fine chance to free her mind and tell this aristocratic beauty, who had flashed meteor-like across the horizon of Candle-box Camp, exactly what she thought of her.

With her to think was to act; so she seized her hat and with a caution to Tubbs and the Chinaman to mind their eyes and look sharp after business, she sallied out, much to the astonishment of her two satellites, who knew not what to make of their mistress's peculiar conduct.

"In love! by all the gods!" the comedian exclaimed.

The almond-eyed son of Orient winked his lead-like orbs and replied, "No savvy."

Molly made a "bee-line" for the foot-hills. Passing the little open valley where the town nestled by the side of the river, she entered the belt of scrubby pines and oaks beyond, went through the "timber," and then, as she came to the edge of it, her onward course was stayed by the sound of voices.

Peering cautiously out from behind the shelter afforded by the pines, Molly saw her rival, Desdemona, seated upon a rock, which cropped up out of the earth, busily engaged in arranging a few wild flowers which she had gathered into a bouquet. Miss Jones, a few paces from her, was amusing herself by punching holes in the ground with her parasol.

The tenor of the conversation between the two, as Molly came to her post of observation was to her interesting in the extreme—the theme was the manager of the Candle-box mine, Richard Talbot.

"Come! you'll own at least that he is a handsome fellow!" Miss Jones insisted.

"Oh, yes; I will admit that he is not bad looking."

"Well, you are just about the proudest and coldest thing I ever did see!" returned the young lady from Angels, impulsively. "I think the fellow is just perfectly splendid, and I only wish he was after me!"

"Why don't you lay siege to him!" Desdemona asked, laughingly.

But the speech did not make Molly, concealed amid the pines, laugh. On the contrary, she doubled up her fist and shook it at the belle of Angels in a most decidedly hostile manner, for she guessed to whom the speaker referred.

"Much good it would do me!" Miss Jones replied. "Why, the man hasn't got eyes for any one but you. It's as plain as plain can be that he is just dying for you—and you, proud thing, don't seem to care at all about it."

"Now, be serious, Polly," the other said, quite soberly. "Just look at the difference in our positions. Do you think it is possible that this gentleman and myself could ever come together? Think of my position and then of his."

"Oh, you're dreadfully proud because you come of old revolutionary stock, and your father has got money; but, suppose that fortune should change; suppose your pa should lose his mine; suppose that you were real poor and didn't know what to do; suppose this man would come to your aid and really keep your from starving to death—"

"Oh, in such a case, gratitude *might* make me think of Richard Talbot!" Desdemona admitted, her face flushing as she spoke.

CHAPTER XXVI.

MOLLY DEFINES HER POSITION.

THE mistress of the Happy Palace could bear it no longer; she felt that she must speak.

"You had better not!" she cried, starting forward from the covert of pines which had concealed her.

Miss Cadwalader sprang to her feet, half in surprise and half in alarm, while the young lady from Angels, who was already ready to give vent to her feelings upon the slightest provocation, indulged in a good loud scream.

The surprise was not lasting, though, for almost immediately both of the girls recognized the intruder.

"What do you mean, you bold thing you, by jumping out at us in this way?" Miss Jones demanded.

"I have nothing to say to *you*, so you had better hold your tongue and mind your own business," Molly replied, with forced calmness, endeavoring with all her power to curb the raging fiend within her. "But you!" and she shook her finger at the astonished Desdemona, "you are my mutton!"

"I really do not understand what you mean," Miss Cadwalader remarked, coldly, drawing herself up as she spoke and favoring the mistress of the Happy Palace with a glance which plainly showed that she was annoyed by the presumption of the girl.

"Oh, you don't!" Molly replied, sarcastically; "you don't understand! Well, I do, and I want you to understand once for all that Dick Talbot ain't for you!"

Desdemona flushed crimson at the words, and

as she hesitated to reply Miss Jones hastened to speak for her.

"What is it your business, anyway?" she cried. "You great horrid thing, you! you had better go back to your nasty saloon and attend to your own affairs."

"You had better hush up or I'll come and slap your face!" Molly retorted, angrily. "It's nothing to you, and if I do keep the Happy Palace, I reckon that I'm just as good as you are any day in the week. You mind your own business now."

"Boo!" retorted the young lady from Angels, disdainfully. If she was not particularly muscular she was plucky, and was not at all disposed to be bullied. "I'm not afraid of you, big as you are, and if you dare to slap my face I'll just scratch you good."

"Don't get excited, Polly," Desdemona remarked, in her cold and quiet way; "this person is evidently laboring under a mistake."

"No, I don't labor under no mistake!" Molly rejoined, and taking very little heed to the correctness of her speech. "You are after Dick Talbot! Do you think that I am blind? Who ran after him the other night up to the big white rock, hey?"

Again Desdemona colored up to the temples, but with a great effort she restrained the angry words that trembled on her tongue.

"It's nothing to do with you, anyway!" Miss Jones hastened to say. "I would run after him in a minute if I thought that I stood any chance to get him, and I would just like to see you or anybody else stop me, too."

"You'll get your hair pulled if you don't keep quiet!" Molly threatened.

By this time Desdemona had recovered her composure, and with that cruel coldness peculiar to her sex prepared to demolish her rival.

"If I understand you rightly, Mr. Talbot is your lover," she said.

Molly knitted her brows in anger; the speech puzzled her, and she hardly knew what to say.

Miss Cadwalader was quick to perceive her advantage and equally quick to improve it.

"Is Mr. Talbot your lover?" she asked, putting the question directly.

Molly was confused, and Miss Jones was not slow to perceive it.

"Of course he isn't!" she exclaimed, "and the horrid bold creature is running after a man who doesn't care two cents for her."

"You mind your own business!" Molly returned, in a rage. "He wouldn't have you, anyway, and it's nothing to nobody whether Mr. Talbot is my lover or not."

"Oh, no; only if he is not your lover, you are surely acting very bold and unmaidenly in troubling yourself about a man who has not sought you."

"But he would—he would have come after me, sure as shootin', if you hadn't come to the Camp!" Molly answered. "And that is what riles me! All I ask is a clear field and no favor, but you come cavorting round hyer with your good harness and your high and mighty airs, and you have jest flopped me right out of the game; you don't give me no show for my money; you know—"

"You are utterly mistaken," Desdemona interrupted, impatiently. "I have not sought this man—I have not striven to attract his attention in any way whatsoever, and, as far as I am concerned, he is free to woo you or any one else."

"Why don't you go 'way?" the girl demanded, desperately. "What do you want to stay hyer for! Go 'way off somewhar and give me some sort of a show."

"Oh, yes, of course!" Miss Jones cried; "that is a reasonable request, I must say. Are you going to drive all the girls in the town out except your own sweet self? Oh! I like your impudence! It makes me smile!" But, despite her words, the young lady from Angels looked anything but smiling.

"I am very sorry that I cannot oblige you," Miss Cadwalader replied, "but for the present I am obliged by force of circumstances to remain in this Camp; but, as far as Mr. Talbot is concerned, I will assure you that I will neither lift eye nor move finger to attract him. More I cannot say. Come, Polly." And then, without even a glance at the other, she walked away, going toward the Camp.

Miss Jones, though, could not refrain from hurling a parting defiance at the saloon girl.

"I wouldn't do that way, if I was in her boots!" she cried, with more force than eloquence. "If I stood any chance at all to get him, I'd have him in spite of you, you great, horrid, ugly thing, you!"

"Go 'long! He wouldn't look at such a fat thing as you are, anyway!" Molly flung back in defiance.

The two friends went on their way, leaving the saloon girl in possession of the field.

It was a barren victory, though, for Molly, and such she felt it to be.

"She talks mighty offish about Talbot," Molly muttered, "but, if I know anything at all, she ain't a turning of her nose up at him as much as she pretends."

The girl was in a quandary; and so, in a very

unsatisfactory state of mind, she took her way back to the Camp.

But, while this interview between the fair ones was taking place, something of great importance, as far as Talbot was concerned, had transpired in the town.

As stated, the genial son of genius, Tubbs, had been given free run of the hotel, in consideration of his furnishing music for the guests at night, but, as Molly had very speedily discovered that the wonderful comedian, like a great many other sons of genius, was particularly partial to the flowing bowl, and was extremely apt to take on board altogether more fire-water than was good for him, she had taken the precaution to cut off the supplies. "Anything you want to eat," she had said, "but no drinks until you are through fiddling at night."

Tubbs had remonstrated, but the girl was firm, and so the gifted child of Arkansaw was forced to give up the alluring vision of free drinks which had previously dazzled his mind; but, since fire-water, gratis, was not to be had, and he was without funds to walk up to the bar and pay his footing like a man, he was compelled to supply his wants by sponging upon the customers who happened to drop into the saloon upon liquid refreshment intent.

And Tubbs, having an easy, oily way with him, did not suffer, but on this particular afternoon, after Molly's departure, he struck the most extensive "angel" he had encountered since he had entered the town.

The "angel" was Klamath John.

John had seen Molly leave the hotel, and suspecting that the comedian might know something of the relations which existed between the girl and Talbot, as he was in the saloon all the time, the revengeful man had deliberately set out to get Tubbs under the influence of liquor so as to make him talk.

John had walked into the saloon, set himself down at one of the small tables provided for the accommodation of customers, called for some canned oysters and a glass of whisky, and then, pretending for the first time to observe Tubbs—who, with hungry eyes, was glaring at the feast, and wondering how best to "strike" the pilgrim—he invited the musician to join him.

"Right willingly, great king!" exclaimed the fiddler, exultingly. "It is but seldom that I do drink, my lord, but when I do, it is just about this time!"

Then Tubbs slid into a chair at the table, winked triumphantly at the Chinaman, and commanded, in bold, heroic measure, to "set 'em up," immediately.

Tubbs had a pretty good head for liquor, but there were few men in this world who could match Klamath John in a drinking bout, and so it followed that within twenty or thirty minutes, Tubbs got "full," and his tongue became loose.

Cunningly, John turned the conversation upon Talbot.

Tubbs needed no prompting to make him speak. With maudlin grief he spoke of Talbot as of a bosom friend, related how he had expected to make a "stake" out of the man who unexpectedly became his preserver, and, in brief, told to the wondering ears of the other the story of the eventful life of Talbot—bold Richard Talbot of Cinnabar, as far as he knew it.

Klamath John was quick to perceive how important was the knowledge, and what great use he could make of it.

Intent upon one trail, he had stumbled upon another.

He had learned enough to serve his purpose, and so he hastened to get clear of Tubbs.

In the open air he walked briskly away. "Inside of ten days, Mister Talbot of Cinnabar, I'll h'ist you out of this Camp!" he cried.

CHAPTER XXVII.

BLAIR MAKES A MOVE.

THE bonanza king was invisible for some time after the night whereon the interview between himself and the iron-fisted superintendent of the Candle-box mine had taken place.

He said that he was sick and kept close to his room, and did not venture abroad until the bruises on his face were pretty well healed up.

One thing worried him in particular; he was sadly afraid that the story of his discomfiture at the hands of Talbot would become known, and he knew full well that if it did it would be the joke of the Camp.

His mind, then, was greatly relieved when his familiar, McCracken, assured him that the story of his adventure had not leaked out.

"He's a quiet sort of a bye, this same Mister Talbot," the Irishman observed—"not at all the kind of man to go bragging around bekase he gave ye a clip or two in the jaw."

And all the time that Blair had been confined to his room he had chafed like a caged lion, and he had never caught sight of his disfigured face in the glass without cursing the hard-fisted Talbot "up hill and down."

No matter what it cost, or how long it took him, he was determined to be fully avenged.

He was convinced that there was a love affair between Desdemona Cadwalader and Talbot.

"Curse the proud hussy!" he had cried, a hundred times. "I'll make her repent that she chose this desperado instead of me! I cannot understand it at all! What can the girl be thinking of? The idea! This fellow, a penniless adventurer—a desperado, and she could have such a man as I am—rich, a power in the land! Bah! these women make me sick!" And then, just about this time he would catch another glimpse of his discolored face and fall to anathematizing Talbot with new vigor.

And in this way the bonanza king amused himself until his face healed up and he looked something like himself once again.

But in the meantime he had not been idle. He had all the papers with him connected with the loan which the old general had negotiated on the mine, and as the money was now due he dispatched McCracken to collect the amount, the Irishman representing that he was the agent of the broker in San Francisco who had made the loan.

General Cadwalader was astounded. He hadn't the slightest idea that the money would be called for so soon, although, according to the terms of the contract, it was due; but, as he explained to McCracken, that was a mere formality, for when he—the general—had received the funds, the broker had assured him the money could lay for any length of time, twenty years if need be, so long as the interest was promptly paid.

Of course McCracken, with the oily smoothness which was his principal stock-in-trade, explained that he was totally ignorant regarding all the details of the matter. He had received instructions to collect the money, and that was all he knew about it.

Then the general asked for time to consult the broker, as he felt sure there was some misunderstanding about the matter. The simple old gentleman never for an instant suspected that he was in the hands of a sharper.

The Irishman at once agreed to this. It would not take very long to reach the broker in San Francisco, and McCracken knew perfectly well what the Frisco sharp's answer would be. He had been obliged to part with his interest in the affair, and he had nothing more to do with it.

The general consulted his daughter. Like many another weak man in this world, the father had kept his business secrets to himself and had always allowed Desdemona to believe that he was still the wealthy man he had once been. The girl was thunderstruck at the discovery.

"Oh, father, and I have been so terribly extravagant!" was her natural cry. "And you, father, you on the verge of ruin! Why did you not tell me?"

Of course the old gentleman affected to laugh the matter off; it was a mistake; the answer from San Francisco would make everything all right.

The girl shook her head; women always seem to scent misfortune further than men; the future looked very black to her, and she gave way to the worst of fears.

"And then, too," the general observed, "I am so utterly ignorant of all this mining business—such a stranger to their customs on this coast."

And as her father spoke an idea flashed into her head.

"Why don't you consult Mr. Talbot, father?" she exclaimed. "He is well versed in mining matters, and will surely be able to give you good counsel."

The thought was a wise one, and the general went at once to Talbot and laid the matter before him.

At the mention of McCracken's name Talbot shook his head; he felt that nothing but evil would come from the wily Irishman.

"Well, now, what do you honestly think about it?" the old gentleman asked, in conclusion.

"Why, general, it is pretty hard to say," Talbot replied, thoughtfully; "but, honestly, I believe you are in a trap."

"A trap!" cried Cadwalader, in amazement.

"Yes, sir, it don't look right to me at all, and I wonder you accepted a loan on such terms."

"Why, the fellow fairly forced it on me," the old gentleman explained. "He said he had the money lying idle and wanted to put it away in a good safe investment."

Talbot laughed; the idea struck him comically: a wild-cat mine as the Candle-box property had always been seemed like anything but a safe investment.

"Well, general, to tell you my honest opinion, I think you are in the hands of a party of sharpers, and that the game is to wrest the mine out of your hands by means of this loan."

"But I have already invested a great deal of money—all that I had, in fact!" Cadwalader exclaimed, agitated. "It would be utter ruin to me!"

"General, these fellows wouldn't care a cent about that. It's the dust they are after. I fancy the head of the gang is right hyer by

the camp now, and this Frisco business is all bosh."

The general was not blind, although anything but far-sighted.

"Do you refer to this Mr. Blair?" he asked, thoughtfully.

"The same—Randolph Blair, the bonanza king. This little operation is a job that suits him exactly. I had a suspicion he was up to something when he first came to town."

"Well, suppose he is at the bottom of the affair—suppose the money is demanded—and I cannot possibly raise it, what then?"

"Well, according to the terms of your contract the mine is gone."

"Which means utter ruin to me!" cried the old man in a trembling voice, deeply affected—"not only to me but to my poor girl, and the blow is a terrible one to her, for, until to-day, she thought that I was independently wealthy."

"Yes, the mine is gone; they have played a pretty sharp game—in fact, rung in a 'cold deal' on you, general, and you are not up to them; the law gives them, or him—for I reckon there is only one man at the back of it all—the law gives the property."

"And leaves me a beggar!"

"But hold on, general," Talbot said, in his quiet way; "there's one or two things in this matter which I don't think you understand, and, smart as the sharp is who has engineered this affair, perhaps he has not calculated quite as closely upon the one or two things as he might."

"Mr. Talbot, I am just as ignorant as a child," the old gentleman asserted, a gleam of hope creeping into his mind that perhaps the man before him knew of some way to baffle the designs of the schemers.

"This contract was made in Frisco," Talbot went on. "Frisco law gives the property to the men, or man, who loaned the money if you do not pay over the funds upon demand, after a certain date."

"Certainly—that is it, exactly; and I cannot perceive any way to avoid the sacrifice."

"Well, what is Frisco law worth up hyer among these mountains?" asked Talbot.

The general stared; he did not understand the question.

"What law is there hyer, except the law of the strong arm?" Talbot continued. "You are in possession of the mine; who is going to turn you out of it?"

"The sheriff, I presume."

"Suppose you laugh at the sheriff; and, mind you, there isn't one sheriff out of twenty who will want a fight of this sort. You are in possession, and that is nine points of the law. They cannot get you out, general, if you make up your mind to stick. Laugh at the demand for the money; defy them to take the mine by force, and then let them come on, and if we don't give them as nice a little fight as ever was seen west of the Rockies, my name is not Richard Talbot."

"And you, Mr. Talbot, you will fight for me, almost a stranger to you?" demanded the old man, in amazement.

"I'm your buttons, general; and I'm going to see you through this fight if it takes a leg!" Talbot replied.

The general was about to pour forth his thanks, when, happening to look through the window, he espied the bonanza king enter the stockade-gate.

"There's Blair now!" he exclaimed.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE BONANZA KING SHOWS HIS HAND.

"GOOD!" responded Talbot; "he comes in the very nick of time. Now, general, you must draw this fellow out, and ascertain if possible exactly how he stands. Mind, you must play sharp, general, for you are dealing with sharpers, and you can't get ahead of them unless you use their own weapons. Find out what he wants; seem to agree with anything he advances without really committing yourself."

"All right, all right!" cried the old gentleman, in a hurry, "I'll do the best I can, but you must remember that this is a line of business I am not at all familiar with."

Then the general hurried forth to meet Blair, and Talbot gazed thoughtfully after him.

"That is so, general," he muttered; "you never said a truer word in your life. You are not at all the sort of man to fight these sharpers, and it is a lucky thing for you that I have taken a great interest in the Candle-box property. But, as it is, I hold the mine, and I reckon it will take better men than Bonanza Blair and his gang to throw me out of it." Then seating himself by the window Talbot prepared to watch the interview.

Blair greeted the general with the utmost cordiality, and after shaking hands with him proceeded to inquire in regard to his health and how the charming Miss Desdemona was getting along.

These polite inquiries answered, Blair touched upon the mine, declared his belief that it was a magnificent property and only wanted proper development to make its owner a millionaire.

With this of course the general assented.

And then, after these preliminaries—having broken ground as it were for his approach—the bonanza king plunged at once into the business upon which he had come.

"Of course, General Cadwalader," he went on; "I presume that you are pretty well acquainted with me, both personally and by reputation, and, although I say it, who, perhaps, ought not to, I am reckoned to be one of the solid men of this coast."

"So I have always understood," the general assented.

"All I have made by my own pluck and energy," Blair asserted—a statement far from the truth, for accident had a great deal more to do with the rise to wealth of the bonanza king than anything else. He had been a petty store-keeper and was forced to take a lot of shares in what was supposed to be a worthless mine for debt. Immediately after the shares came into his possession the mine suddenly blossomed out into a veritable bonanza and Blair's fortune was made.

"Yes, I have always heard your knowledge and skill spoken of in the highest terms."

Blair nodded; he took the compliment as a matter of course.

"Well, general, to come at once to the point, for I'm a plain man of business, you know, without any nonsense about me," the speculator averred; "I am pretty well fixed as far as this world goes and I think it is about time I settled down in life and built up a family around me. In fine, I've made up my mind to get married, and I have never run across any girl who seems to suit me as well as your beautiful daughter."

The general was most decidedly astonished; he had not expected this at all, although, if he had not been as blind as a bat, he ought to have noticed that Blair had long been trying to play the agreeable to his child.

Blair noticed the look upon the face of the old gentleman.

"Oh, you haven't observed this?" he exclaimed. "Well, I reckoned you would have noticed it, long ago. You know it now, anyway, so that's all straight! How does it strike you, eh?"

Now it did not strike the father at all favorably, for Blair was about the last man in the world whom he would have selected for a son-in-law, but remembering Talbot's caution he had wit enough to conceal his opinion.

"Really, you have so taken me by surprise that I don't know what to say."

A frown shadowed the face of the speculator; was it going to be war after all?

"You see, I am a regular straight up and down and above-board fellow," he explained; "I always aim square at the mark and never waste time fooling around. I come right to you and let you see how the land lays, and if you have no objection, now you know how I feel on this subject, I will have a talk with Miss Desdemona."

The general's face lit up at once; like all weak men he hated trouble; he didn't know exactly how to get rid of the suitor without offending him, and, as women always manage this sort of thing better than men, he was glad to shift the responsibility to his daughter's shoulders. Of course he felt morally certain what Desdemona's answer would be.

"You'll find my daughter in the house, Mr. Blair," he said. "It will be better to consult her, for of course I should not wish to attempt to control her action in any way."

A dark and wicked look came into the eyes of the speculator. "You old beggar," he thought, "you know well enough the girl will refuse me, and you think you are going to get rid of me in this way."

What he said was: "All right; I'll walk in and have a talk with her. I suppose if she and I come to an understanding you won't throw any obstacles in the way?"

"Certainly not," the general replied, with an easy conscience, perfectly sure that Desdemona would speedily send Mr. Blair and his suit to the rightabout.

Blair advanced to the house. Desdemona was sitting by the window sewing, and as the speculator approached she arose and admitted him.

Blair walked in with a confident air, helped himself to a chair, and without ceremony plunged into his subject.

"Miss Desdemona, I have taken the liberty to visit you on very important and particular business," he began. "I have already had a little talk with your father, and it is with his permission I now address you."

The girl, though surprised at the speech, had an idea of what was coming, so prepared herself for the unpleasant ordeal. She bowed her head, which Blair understood to be a signal for him to continue.

"I am a plain, matter-of-fact man, Miss Desdemona, and I beg you to believe that in this my action is prompted by a sincere desire to serve you."

Again the girl bowed, but her calm face afforded no clew to the thoughts passing in her mind.

"Your father, I understand, is in considerable difficulty—that is, in monetary embarrass-

ment, and the chances are that, if some one don't come to his assistance and put up a stake for him, he will be obliged to loosen his gripe on this mine, which would be mighty rough on him."

"Yes, sir."

This simple sentence didn't aid Blair in the least, and the position became awkward.

"In fact, Miss Desdemona, to come right down to bed rock, I have made up my mind to help your father out."

"You are very kind." The words were well enough, but the tone was formal and without feeling.

"It will take a good bit of money, too!" Blair declared. "But, mind you, when my heart is set upon a thing I don't value money any more than so much water."

"It is fortunate to be rich," and there was the echo of a sigh in the girl's voice as she spoke.

"Well, I am rich! Not many men on this coast are any richer, either!" the speculator boasted. "But, as I have said, money is nothing to me when I want a thing. Now, I have made up my mind to come to your father's aid and put him right onto his legs again. It will take a heap of cash, perhaps, but I don't care a straw for that. I'm willing to spend half of what I am worth, as far as that is concerned, and nary a bit of interest will I charge either!"

"You are very kind," again the girl said, but there was not the least bit of expression in the voice.

"And I am doing it all for your sake!"

"For mine?"

"Yes; the fact is, I have concluded that you will make as nice a wife for me as any girl in all this big world. I've got plenty of money, and nary a woman East or West shall outshine you in diamonds and dress. In fact, you shall have anything you want if you will only say the word and become Mrs. Randolph Blair."

The girl's gaze was out of the window; her eyes rested on her father's form. The old gentleman did not seem to be bowed down with grief; she would do much to aid her father, but as she looked upon him she could not bring herself to believe that the danger which menaced him was so great as to make her sacrifice necessary to save him.

CHAPTER XXIX.

AN OMINOUS WARNING.

BLAIR watched the face of the girl, now for the first time betraying some expression; he understood that she was meditating how best to frame a denial of his suit. And then, in suppressed rage he vowed that, before she was many days older he would make her regret her action, if she dared to refuse him.

After a long pause, Desdemona spoke. It was an ungracious task to refuse even such a suitor as the blunt and out-spoken speculator, who sought to buy a woman's love as he would buy the aid of a venal legislator.

"I am very sorry, indeed, Mr. Blair, that I am not able to accept your offer," she said, "but, truth compels me to say that I do not think any happy union can be based upon worldly advantages—"

"Oh, that is all nonsense!" Blair interrupted. "Just say that you will have me and I'll take my chances for the love coming afterward. There isn't a bit of romance about me, and I don't believe in school-boy and school-girl love."

"I regret to differ with you," she replied, coldly, for the tone in which Blair spoke greatly offended her.

"Oh, it is all right, miss!" and Blair arose as he spoke; but, it was apparent that it was not all right, as far as he was concerned, for he was in a furious rage. "Of course your father will have to fight his battles alone now, for on this hyer coast it is each man for himself and the old man with the hoofs and tail down below for us all! It is dollars to cents, now, that your father goes to the wall, for he is in too deep to get out without aid, and, besides, there is some pretty sharp men after the mine who will be pretty apt to get it. I could have pulled him through, but since you are too proud to listen to reason, why, you will not have anybody but yourself to blame if you suffer. I can see as well as anybody—I am not blind; but I am not at all flattered to think that the nose of such a man as I am can be put out of joint by such a miserable desperado as this fellow that you have gone crazy after; and the chances are a hundred to one, too, that he'll stretch bemp before he gets out of this town!"

Then the speculator abruptly departed, leaving the girl both white and crimson with rage and shame. She was speechless to defend herself, even if he had staid, for the unexpected accusation astounded her beyond expression. What had she ever done to deserve such an attack?

Blair was hot with rage as he strode out into the open air, although events had transpired exactly as he had expected and feared. It was a rule of the bonanza king never to miss a chance, and so he had come upon what he had felt sure in the beginning would be a hopeless quest, but the refusal enraged him none the less though for being expected.

The general, who was on the watch, saw at once that the interview had terminated as he had guessed it would.

"Well, General Cadwalader, it is no go!" Blair informed him, attempting to force a smile of indifference as he came up.

"I am sorry, Mr. Blair," the general said, courteously, "but, to be honest with you, I had an idea that you would not succeed. So far as I know no gentleman yet has succeeded in pleasing my daughter's fancy."

"Well, all I have got to say is that it is a mighty stupid thing to let a whim stand between you and ruin!" Blair exclaimed, bluntly.

"You see, general, I am in the ring, and I know exactly how you are fixed. You are in a pretty bad box. If your gal and I had hitched teams, why, I would have gone in with you, and I would have pulled you through, sure as you're born! But, as it is, you know I'm on the make! I am just as hot after a stake as any man on the coast, and if I see a chance to hister you, of course it is only natural for me to go in. That is human nature, you know."

"Yes, I suppose so," the old gentleman admitted. He was but little disturbed; the cheering words of Talbot had given him a great deal of backbone.

"I don't suppose you know the 'lay' your daughter is on!" Blair added, "but, as a friend, I am going to put you on your guard."

The general opened his eyes: what was the other driving at?

"These quiet girls get the very mischief into their heads sometimes; still waters run deep, you know; and to come right down to good plain English, your gal won't have me because she is over head and ears in love with this fellow that you've got here."

The general looked the amazement he felt; he thought he had kept his eyes about him pretty well, but he hadn't noticed that Desdemona had been at all intimate with anybody, the young lady from Angels excepted.

"Really, I don't understand what you mean," he demurred.

"Why, are you blind? Can't you see that this Talbot has been after your gal ever since she came to town?"

"Oh, no, not at all! You are entirely mistaken!" the father stoutly protested.

"No, I am not. It is you who are mistaken if you think that it isn't so! Why, it is as plain as the nose on a man's face, to any one but you."

"The idea is ridiculous!" the old gentleman asseverated, in contempt. "Mr. Talbot is a nice enough man in his way—a very quiet, gentlemanly fellow, indeed, for a man who can be as wild and savage as any desperado of them all; but the idea that there can be any love affair between my Desdemona and Talbot is utterly absurd."

"Oh, is it?" sneered the speculator. "Just ask her, then, what she was doing between eight and nine o'clock at night, at the big white rock up the river, with this Talbot a few nights ago?"

"No, no, I shall not do anything of the kind!" the general retorted, testily. "You are mistaken, sir; I know that you are mistaken. Of course, under the circumstances, you naturally feel offended because the girl did not accept your suit, but this idea that you have got into your head is really ridiculous—too absurd for anything."

"Well, question her; that is all I have to say!" Blair replied. "You ask her if she didn't meet this Talbot at the place I mentioned, and if she says that she didn't, why, she is either a liar, or else I am one."

If the general had not been an extremely easy and polite man, the chances are that he would have informed the speculator that, in his mind, there wasn't the least doubt in regard to the liar.

Just at this point, though, the conversation was suddenly interrupted. Two men came in through the gate—two of the most prominent citizens of the town, Judge Zebulon Gobble, the storekeeper, and Bill Smith, the express-messenger.

"How are you, general?" accosted the judge, as he came up; "how do you do, Mr. Blair? General, I reckon that my pardner, hyer, and myself hev come on a mighty onpleasant dooty."

"Eh?" Cadwalader was amazed, while Blair looked the curiosity he felt.

"The fact is that Mr. Smith hyer and myself hev bin app'nted a committee of two for to wait onto you," the judge explained.

Smith nodded. "He's giving it to you correct, gents," he said. This express-messenger was noted for being a man of few words.

"A committee of two? I don't exactly understand. What is the matter—who appointed you, and why have you come?"

"The citizens of this hyer Camp of Candle-box," the judge replied. "The fact is, general, it has leaked out that you hev bin a-harborin' a pretty bad character in this hyer mine, and when the men in the Camp found it out, they thought as how you ought to be notified; and the chap, too, ought to be notified. You see, general, we don't want to raise the Vigilantes if we kin help it, but when it gits round that thar's a red-handed murderer, and a boss-thief, and a

white-man-killer in the Camp, it's mighty apt to make the boys a leetle oneasy."

"Oh, yes, I can understand that," the old gentleman assented, somewhat relieved in his mind, for he feared that the mission had some connection with the pecuniary embarrassments under which he labored. Men in difficulties are apt to be nervous, and to realize the truth of the poet's line:

"The thief doth fear each bush an officer."

"Yes, sir-ee!" the judge declared, emphatically; "you've got the king-pin of all the wild devils that has made it rough for honest men for the last ten years on this hyer coast, and we Candle-box Campers kinder want the cuss to come out and show his hand."

"Yes, we want to know his leetle game, you bet!" put in Smith, emphatically.

"All right, gentlemen; I'll do all I can for you!" the general hastened to declare. "But, the fact is, I had no idea that we had any such man connected with the works. Our hands here, have been selected with a great deal of care, I assure you, and I really thought they would more than compare favorably with any other miners in the town. Mr. Talbot, my superintendent, assured me that he had picked nothing but good men."

"Talbot!" exclaimed the judge.

"Talbot!" cried Smith.

"Yes, Talbot; what of it?"

"Why, he's the man! the worst sharp that ever made a pilgrim throw up his hands!" the judge fairly shouted.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE ANSWER TO THE CHARGE.

TALBOT'S name had been spoken so loudly that the sound had reached the superintendent within the mill. He at once came forth, and a deep hush fell upon the throng as he appeared.

With anxious eyes the committee gazed upon him, for the man whom they were denouncing must have overheard their words, and was now coming forth to demand satisfaction; but there was nothing in Talbot's manner to indicate that he harbored hostile thoughts. Indeed, he looked surprised when he saw the committee, and they stared blankly at him.

The old general, who was in a terrible muddled-up state, was the first to break the silence.

"Ah, Mr. Talbot, you have come in the nick of time," he remarked. "These gentlemen have come to see me about you"—and then the general halted abruptly in his speech.

"About me?" and Talbot betrayed his own surprise.

"Yes," said the judge, slowly.

"Jess so!" Smith supplemented.

The committee felt that they were in an extremely awkward position. When they had accepted the honor conferred upon them by their fellow-citizens of the town, and had agreed to go to the Candle-box mine and there inform Talbot that Candle-box Camp had come to the conclusion his room was better than his company, it seemed a very simple and easy thing to do, although, of course, an unpleasant duty; but now that they were face to face with the desperado, the duelist, the road-agent, the hero of a hundred daring adventures, it suddenly occurred to them that the position which they had accepted was no sinecure.

Talbot looked inquiringly at the two, but neither one seemed inclined to explain, and so he proceeded to question them:

"Well, gentlemen, what is it?" he asked. "Here I am as large as life and twice as natural. If you have anything to say about me I hope you will spit it out as soon as possible."

Each delegate looked at the other as much as to suggest that it would be the proper thing for the other to answer.

"You see, Talbot," remarked the storekeeper at last, very smoothly, and assuming the oily manner which has been common to the average storekeeper since storekeeping first began, "myself and Mr. Smith here—you know Smith?" Talbot nodded. "Wa-al, we air hyer to represent the people of this hyer Camp, and when we speak, you know, it is jest the same as this hyer hull Camp speaking."

"Yes, yes, I understand that of course!" Talbot exclaimed, impatiently. "But what have the people of Candle-box Camp got to say to me? This is the point before the meeting."

"Wa-al, Talbot, you musn't cut up rough, you know—"

"Cut up rough!" the superintendent cried. "Why should I cut up rough? What is it you have to say to me that leads you to suppose there is a likelihood of such a thing?"

"The Camp says git, Mr. Talbot!" blurted out the express-agent, bluntly. Smith saw that Gobble wasn't making any progress, and so resolved to cut the knot.

For a moment Talbot's eyes flashed fire.

"Oho! Candle-box Camp says 'git,' does it?" and he advanced three steps toward the two.

"That is it exactly, Mr. Talbot!" the general hastened to remark. "and I must say that I am extremely surprised, for I don't understand the matter at all. These two gentlemen were trying to explain to me when you came out, but I

am such a stranger to the manners and customs of this Pacific slope, that I did not understand the affair as well as I probably would have done if I had not been a stranger."

"Gentlemen, an explanation is in order," Talbot observed, his tone quiet, but a peculiar glitter in his dark eyes.

The two understood immediately that Talbot "meant business," and that it was time the voice of the Camp should speak.

"The fact is, Mr. Talbot, some little things 'bout your past life hev come to the ears of the boys, and they kinder held a meeting together and concluded it would be healthier for the Camp if you would pull up stakes and emigrate," Gobble explained.

"What have I done?"

"Oh, nothin'—nothin' hyer that anybody knows of, but your past life, you know—"

"What of it?" asked Talbot, quickly.

The judge hesitated, and Smith with his customary terse bluntness came to the rescue.

"Ain't you that same Dick Talbot who used to be called Injun Dick?"

"I have been so called."

"And there has been a price set upon your head, so much for you, dead or alive?"

"That is correct; the Governor of this great and glorious State did take such a fancy to me once that he offered a reward for my production," Talbot answered, coolly.

"Hain't you been a road-agent, the terror of all Northern California?"

"Oh, now you are piling it on a little too strong," Dick remarked, with a sarcastic smile. "But, to sum it all up, suppose I am the man, what then?"

"Wa-al, if so be as how you are Dick Talbot—Injun Dick, the road-agent and desperado," Gobble said, slowly, "the people of this hyer Camp—meaning no offense to you, you know—would be very much obliged if you could make it convenient to go somewhere else."

"Candle-box Camp objects to my presence, then?"

"Yes, sir, it do!" the judge responded, firmly. He felt that the dignity of the Camp was at stake now, and that a bold front must be presented.

"General, what have you got to say about this—how does this sort of thing strike you?" Talbot asked, addressing the old gentleman.

"Mr. Talbot, really, I don't know anything about it," the general responded. "All that I can say is I haven't the least bit of fault to find with you. You have performed your duties here to my satisfaction—my entire satisfaction—and, gentlemen, if you require any security for Mr. Talbot's good behavior I will gladly be his bond for all that I am worth."

That Talbot was affected by the generous offer was plainly apparent in his face.

"General, I am very much obliged to you!" he rejoined; "but this Camp of Candle-box has no right to require any guarantees from me. Whatever my past life may have been—whatever acts I may have committed, no sheriff in all this big State has a right to tap me on the shoulder. The broad seal of the State gives me full protection, for I hold a full pardon that covers all offenses in the past."

"There, you see, gentlemen, Mr. Talbot has a clear record!" the general exclaimed, delighted.

But this statement did not appease the delegates, for both of them shook their heads.

"General, I'm sorry, but this hyer thing won't satisfy the citizens at all," the judge remarked.

"They want me to get out right or wrong, eh?" Talbot suggested. "That is, to come right down to the English of it, I am in somebody's way as long as I remain in this town: this Camp ain't big enough to hold me and the men who hate me and so I must go."

"Oh, no; a regular public meetin' decided upon this hyer thing," the judge explained.

"The fact is, Mr. Talbot, this Camp is afraid of you; you have been mixed up in a couple of difficulties already, and we men of the Camp don't know what you might do if you once got started. We don't want to hev no trouble, you know, and so the Camp says to you as polite and nice as it knows how, 'Will you hev the kindness to git out, Mister Dick Talbot?'"

"I understand all about it!" the superintendent returned, impatiently. "I understand how easy it is for half a dozen men to engineer a thing of this sort, but this time the parties at the back of this will find they have awakened the wrong passenger."

"Wa-al, Talbot, all I've got to say is, that it is the opinion of the Camp that you had better go."

"And suppose I don't go?" cried the superintendent, for the first time betraying visible signs of irritation. "Suppose I laugh at your warning, as it deserves to be laughed at, what then?"

The judge hesitated to answer, and so the express-messenger took it upon himself to reply.

"Talbot, you know what happens when one man sets himself up ag'in' the will of such a Camp as this," he said, and then with an expressive piece of pantomime he signified a "hanging match."

"And that is what Candle-box Camp says to me, is it?"

Both delegates nodded.

"Go back to the men who sent you and tell them I won't leave this town until I am carried out!" Talbot replied.

And the two departed—astonished men, for it is not often that one man defies a whole town.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A BLOODY DEED.

NEITHER Cadwalader nor the superintendent spoke until the two men passed through the gate and disappeared; then the general turned to Talbot.

"This is a most astonishing thing!" he declared. "I don't understand it!"

"Oh, I do, sir," Talbot replied. "It is all a part of a deep-laid plan. Some of these fellows already have had a taste of my quality, and they don't like it, so they have made up their minds to run me out of the town. It is very easy to manufacture public sentiment in a case of this kind, particularly when they have some ground to start with. My past life won't really bear inspection; I have been a wild and desperate man; at one time an outlaw, hunted like a wild beast and forced to seek refuge with the red-men in the mountain fastnesses. It was just such another case as this, too; I was in control of a valuable mine, and some speculators wanted it. They tried to buy me, but that dodge failed; so they were obliged to use force. We had a bloody fight and I succeeded in holding the mine, but at last the whole town got on the war-path against me, and, trusting to the promise made me by the mayor of the town, that I should have a fair show for my money, I was fool enough to surrender; but, as after events proved, I simply gave myself up into the hands of my enemies. I was condemned to die, after a mockery of a trial, condemned because I had been faithful to my duty and had shed blood in defending my own property. I came so near to death that I felt the hangman's rope around my neck, but, thanks to a red queen who had taken a fancy to me, I escaped. Of course from that time forth I was an outlaw, and I didn't dare to show myself in any Californian town in my own proper person. In time, though, I managed to procure a pardon; and now, whatever my past life has been—whether I have sinned or suffered—no man has the right to say aught against me."

"But how do you suppose this affair will end?" asked the old gentleman, anxiously.

"Well, general, if you want my honest opinion, I think we are going to have a terrible amount of trouble," Talbot replied. "This mine is a good one—as good a one as I have seen for many a day, and now with the improvements you have put upon it it is in splendid condition, and there is no doubt in my mind that it is going to turn out to be a regular bonanza; and, general, candidly I may say that if these conspirators succeed in getting me out of the way, you are no match for them. This is a wild and lawless Camp—about as rough a set of fellows as I ever saw, and they are going to side with the man that pays the best."

"You don't really think that actual violence will be tried?" the old gentleman queried.

"Yes, I do, and it will not be the first time a claim has been jumped in this region; but don't you worry yourself about that. I knew what I was about when I engaged the hands, and I tell you, general, I've got as good a gang of fighting-men as can be scared up in this region, and there ain't men enough in this town, even if all join in against us, to clean us out. As far as open, actual force is concerned, we can hold the mine until the bottomless pit freezes over."

The general felt very much reassured at this rather emphatic declaration. He had learned to place implicit faith in Talbot's words, although the superintendent was almost a stranger to him.

"We certainly have got the law on our side, and no one has any right to resort to violence until the courts decide that I haven't any claim to the mine; and, although I am comparatively ignorant of mining matters, I am pretty well posted in legal affairs, and I know very well that if I choose to fight the matter I can keep it before the courts for a couple of years."

"And before that time, if the mine produces as I feel sure it will, you can pay what you owe on it twice over."

"Exactly my idea," the general assented.

The conversation at this point was interrupted by the appearance of the negro Ginger, who had been sitting in his usual position outside, by the gate.

"Say, Massa Talbot!" he exclaimed, as he approached, "did you have any fuss wid dem two men dat jes' done gone?"

"Well, no, not a fuss exactly, but I reckon they are no friends of mine; why do you ask?"

"Cos I heerd one on 'em say to de odder as dey went out, 'He isn't gwine to git out.' 'Nary git out,' de odder one said. 'Den dey'll clean him out,' de odder one said. 'You bet,' sed de odder one."

The general and Talbot exchanged glances, then Talbot laughed.

"They mean business, and I reckon there is fun ahead," Talbot remarked, quietly. "Just keep your eyes open, Ginger, and if you ever see a crowd making for the stockade just jump inside, bang the gate to and raise an alarm."

"Is dere gwine to be a fight?"

"Well, I reckon there is a likely chance for one."

"Good for you, sah; Ise been a-wantin' to kill one of dem white men for some time; de las' time dat I was in de town one of dem low trash sed dat if I would pay for de brush and de whitewash he would turn me into a white man, an' I jes' want a chance to git squar' wid him, dat's all!" And with this bloodthirsty observation Ginger departed.

"You see how he feels about it," Talbot remarked; "and, general, I've sounded all the rest of the boys and there isn't one of them who won't stand by the mine to the death."

"Well, well, I hope we will not have any trouble, but if we do we must meet it like men," the old gentleman replied.

"We will try and do that, sir, and give as good as we receive."

And here the interview terminated. The general went into the house and Talbot returned to his work in the mill.

The day wore away and night came.

The mill shut down and toil ended.

Talbot had established a regular military system; the men were all boarded and lodged on the place, and only one-half of them allowed to be absent in the evening at one time; thus, one-half went out one night and the other half the next night.

The stockade gate was closed promptly at dusk and from an elevated position a sentinel kept careful watch and ward, so to surprise the fortress—for such in truth was the mine now—would be almost an impossibility.

Talbot was too old a bird, and knew the peculiar tactics usually employed by the claim-jumpers too well to be caught napping.

Supper was over and the men who were off duty had strolled up the street to the center of the camp, intent upon enjoyment.

Ginger, the negro, was at his usual post, the big rock just outside the stockade, enjoying a pipe. It was yet too early to shut the fortress up, for there was very little danger of any attack at such an hour.

A man came hastening down the street with rapid footsteps and approaching the stockade accosted Ginger, evidently in a high state of agitation.

It was Tubbs, the comedian from Arkansaw. "See here, uncle, I want to see Mr. Talbot!" he exclaimed.

The dignity of the negro was affronted at once by the term "uncle;" it recalled the old slavery days, the cotton-patch, the overseer and the whip.

"Who is you callin' uncle?" he demanded, indignantly. "Go 'way, you pore, low-down white trash, I's no uncle of you's. You jes' be keerful how you undress me or I'll jes' mash you! I don't 'low no sich liberties, you hear me!"

"Most potent, grave and reverend signior! to the dust I bow me!" cried Tubbs, who, despite the gravity of his mission, could not refrain from his ridiculous habit of "spouting." "I come on the wings of the night, and a tale I could unfold that would harrow up thy young soul and make each particular hair to stand on end—"

"Go 'way; it kinks too much!"

"Talbot! I must see him on business that will not brook delay, and so I pray thee, gentle master, fly with all thy speed and tell him that, no matter how fast he shuts his door, ill-tidings knock, and he, perforce, must open!"

"Say, are you crazy?" cried Ginger, in amazement.

"Fly, good Gobbo! Good Launcelot Gobbo, take to thy heels and run! Tell Talbot that his life is threatened, and that I must hold earnest converse with him."

"What's dat? Is dey gwine for Massa Talbot?"

"Yes, yes! Run at once and tell him that I must see him! What I have to say may save his life, so get thee gone, thou foul fiend."

"You'll get mashed if you don't quit dem names!" Ginger cautioned, as he retreated.

"Fly! and may all good angels bless and guard thee!" howled Tubbs, who, in spite of the gravity of the situation, could not keep his theatrical madness within bounds.

Ginger hurried to the house, leaving Tubbs at the gate.

The negro opened the door and entered the building; a minute or two he remained within the house, and then Tubbs could plainly distinguish, through the dusky gloom, two forms come forth.

The negro was evidently in the advance, for his voice sounded plainly on the air.

"Dis voice, sah; de man's down at de gate!"

Hardly had the last word of the sentence fallen on the air when the sharp, quick report of a gun rung out full and clear; with a cry of anguish the man who was following the negro threw up his arms and fell.

"Eternal Heavens!" cried Tubbs, in horror. "my warning has come too late, and they have killed Talbot!" And then, panic-stricken, he took to his heels and ran away.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE ROAD-AGENT'S MASK.

THE shot had come from the top of the north stockade wall. Three men had dogged Tubbs' footsteps from the Happy Palace, and when he had accosted the negro at the gate of the stockade, they had skulked around the works to the north side.

Everything was in readiness for the successful carrying out of the bloody purpose upon which the three had come.

Within a clump of pines near by, a double-barreled shot-gun and a rude ladder were concealed.

The men drew the ladder forth from its place of concealment, placed it against the wall and then one of them, taking the gun, ascended; with steady, resolute purpose he waited for the appearance of the man who had been destined for an untimely grave.

The plan had been cunningly contrived. The vagabond comedian, who never let a chance escape to extol Talbot, whom he declared to be a hero worthy to rank with any of the ancient Greeks, had been approached, and a mysteriously worded communication had been conveyed to him, the purport of it being that Talbot was to be assaulted that very night, if he happened to come up-town, by a blood-thirsty gang who had sworn to take his life, and if he did not visit the Happy Palace that evening, then, at the midnight hour, the assassins were to go the Candle-box mine, rouse the superintendent from his slumber, and summon him to the door upon some specious pretext; then, when he appeared, he was to be immediately attacked.

It was represented to Tubbs that he would be doing the man he glorified a great service if he, Tubbs, went at once and warned him of the danger that threatened.

"Go right down to the mine, now," whispered the tempter. "You will find that big negro at the gate; just tell him that you want to see Talbot on particular business, and he will go in and fetch him out."

Tubbs, who in some respects was as credulous as a child, eagerly caught at the chance to do Talbot a service, so started off at once, little suspecting that he was being used as a lure to entice the man who had so nobly befriended him to a terrible death.

The scheme succeeded to perfection as has been seen.

The man who had fired the death-dealing shot lingered long enough on the wall to see his victim reel and fall and then he jumped down and joined his companions.

"Is he settled?" cried one of the two who had remained upon the ground.

"You bet!" replied the other, tersely, "unless he has as many lives as a cat and can live with a charge of buckshot in his breast."

"It's time we wasn't hyer!" warned the third man, and acting at once upon the suggestion they hastened away.

The sound of the shot had stirred up the Candle-box people at once; every man within the mine came rushing out.

Even the two girls came to the door.

The discharge of fire-arms within the works was a certain signal that mischief was afoot.

"What is the matter?" Desdemona cried, anxiously, as she peered out into the dusky night.

And the men who gathered around the lifeless man—for death swiftly and surely had followed the discharge of the assassin's gun—put the same question to the negro who, amazed and horror-stricken, was gazing at the lifeless form, like one transformed suddenly into stone.

"Deed I dunno how it was done!" Ginger cried. "A man come to de gate an' sed he done want to see Massa Talbot, and den dey shot him!"

The words came fully to the listening ears of the two girls.

"My God—Talbot!" came in a piercing scream from the lips of Desdemona; then she reeled and fell in a dead faint to the floor.

And that shrill scream gave fresh speed to the footsteps of a man who had been deep down in the recesses of the mine carefully examining a new vein of ore which the workmen had struck into that day.

He carried a lantern in his hand, and as he dashed forward and joined the little group around the dead body of the man who had been sent so untimely to his last reckoning by the assassin's shot, the light illuminated the scene.

Prone upon his back, with his hands clenched rigid in the convulsion that had preceded death, the blood welling forth from the wounds in his breast, lay old General Cadwalader.

The wrong man had fallen a victim!

The old gentleman had gone to Talbot's quarters to consult with him, not knowing that he had descended into the mine, and when the negro had brought the message that a man at

the gate desired to see the superintendent, in Talbot's absence the general had come forth to see what the man wanted.

Talbot's lantern revealed the scene in all its horror.

"How did it happen—who fired the shot?" Dick demanded.

"Massa Talbot, I clare to goodness, I dunno!" Ginger protested, in a frightful state of agitation. "De ole man come out arter me; dere was a man at de gate dat wanted to see you an' ne sed dat he see him, an' de furst t'ing I knowd—*bim!* dat gun went off an' de ole man screeched an' fell, but who did it, de good Lord knows dat I dunno!"

"I heard Miss Desdemona scream—is she hurt?" Talbot asked.

"I guess she saw that her father was killed," one of the miners suggested. "She was standing at the door looking out as I came by."

"Examine the outside of the stockade, boys, and I'll be with you in a moment!" the superintendent ordered. "And, Ginger, you take the body into my shanty and put it on the bunk."

The commands were obeyed at once, and while they were being carried out Talbot hastened to the girl whose shrill cry had rung out so startlingly on the night air.

Miss Jones was busily engaged in reviving Desdemona, for she still lay in a deathlike state.

"Oh, is that you, Mr. Talbot?" the young lady from Angel's exclaimed. "Why, I thought you was killed, and Desdemona fainted away."

"Because she thought that I was killed?"

"Yes, sir; we understood the men to say so."

"And doesn't she know who the victim is?" Talbot asked.

"Oh, no, sir; is there any one hurt?"

Talbot hesitated for a moment, but upon reflection he thought that Miss Jones had better know the truth, for there was no one in the Camp who could as well inform Desdemona of the great affliction which had befallen her, and so aptly break the force of the terrible blow; so, as carefully as he could, he told the sad story of the tragedy.

With all her frivolous ways the girl had an excellent heart and a sound understanding. Then, too, she was used to wild scenes, for all her young life had been spent in a mining-camp, so she did not yield to overpowering grief, although dreadfully shocked by the news, and after the first outburst of astonishment was over she said that she would do her best to convey the sad intelligence to the now orphaned girl.

Then Talbot hurried away to join in the search for the man who had done the bloody deed.

The miners had not started when the superintendent came forth. They had been endeavoring to get some information in regard to the attack from the negro Ginger, but the black was utterly at fault.

Although he had only been a step or two from the general when the fatal shot was fired, yet he had no more idea of who aimed the deadly bullet, or from what direction the shot had come, than if he had been a hundred miles away.

"Deed, I dunno anyt'ing 'bout it!" he declared, completely dazed and bewildered. "De furst t'ing I know'd I heered de gun go bing! den de general he hollered, an' I turned round, mighty skereed, I tell yer, an' dar was de boss down onto de ground."

Talbot put Ginger through a brief cross-examination and soon became satisfied in regard to the truth of the matter.

The man who had come to see him, and whom the negro in his bewilderment declared he had completely forgotten, was evidently sent by the concealed assassins to lure him forth. The general coming in his place was mistaken in the dark for him and so fell a victim.

"We must scout around the fence and see if we cannot find some traces of the men who have done this bloody deed!" Talbot exclaimed. "Three of you go to the left and the rest come with me."

Every man in the party was armed, and being armed were eager for a hunt. At the gate the party separated, as Talbot had suggested—the division led by the superintendent going along the fence to the northward and then turning to the west. They were the first to arrive at the spot where the ladder was placed.

And the moment the superintendent saw the ladder he understood how the bloody work had been accomplished.

Then something white rolled around one of the rungs of the rude ladder attracted Talbot's attention.

He examined it and saw that it was a piece of white paper.

"A clew, perhaps, boys!" he cried, as he removed and opened it.

And a clew indeed it was, to the authors of the dreadful deed, for, when the paper was opened, there upon the white surface was displayed a blood-red hand!

CHAPTER XXXIII.

AN ATTACK IN FORCE.

ALTHOUGH possessed of this sure and certain

clew, yet Talbot felt satisfied that any pursuit now would be useless. The road-agents, who had left the blood-red hand token behind them that their agency in the tragedy might be known to all, had taken immediately to the hills and in the gloom of the night it was folly to dream of tracking them.

But the miners were eager and anxious to do something, and so Talbot, against his better judgment, gave orders for a pursuit.

The search was unavailing, though, as Dick had expected it would be, but some time was consumed in it, and it was quite late when the party returned.

The news of the violent death of the general had traveled rapidly through the town, and about all the able-bodied inhabitants of the Camp had congregated at the mine.

Desdemona in time had recovered from her swoon and her first words were in regard to Talbot.

"Is he really dead?" she asked, piteously.

"Yes, dear!" Miss Jones replied, forgetting for the moment that the girl was ignorant of the true victim.

"Oh, heavens! how terrible! Generous, noble-hearted Talbot!" she exclaimed, a world of meaning in her tones.

"Desdemona, it is not Mr. Talbot," the other said, slowly.

"Not Mr. Talbot!" and a joyful light sparkled in her eyes—a light which afflicted the other girl to a painful degree, for she feared the reaction which must surely come when Desdemona learned the truth.

It was a terrible task, but the girl from Angel's performed it nobly. Little by little she prepared Desdemona for the painful truth, and so, when at last she did reveal to her that it was her own loved father who lay cold in death, although indeed it was a fearful blow, yet it did not kill or even stun, for the girl had braced herself to meet it.

Nature relieved itself by a violent outburst of tears, and as she sobbed in the arms of her friend, whose tears, too, fell as freely as the other's, she moaned that fate had ever directed her father's steps to the great Pacific slope. He had come in search of fortune but had found a grave instead.

The miners of the Camp held a little sort of an impromptu meeting without and appointed a committee to visit the young lady and tender her their sympathy in her sad affliction.

Mastering her grief as well as she was able, she thanked the miners for their kindness, and said, in reference to their offer of aid, that if she needed assistance she would gladly call upon them.

Blair and McCracken had been very active in this and had formed two of the committee, and they had improved the opportunity to drop certain hints—regarding the assassin, or assassins, of the old gentleman which they hoped would produce some impressions that would be of use to them in their schemes.

Talbot's return with the men who had been in pursuit of the murderer, and the production of the piece of paper which they had found upon the ladder, at once satisfied all that the strangely-disguised road-agents were at the bottom of the affair; but then, the question at once came up, who were the road-agents?

Each man looked distrustfully at his neighbor when the question was asked.

It was probable—more than probable, almost certain that the road-agents were inhabitants of the Camp.

Then the dark insinuations that the Irishman and the bonanza king had so cunningly let fall began to take effect, and more than one man in the crowd shook his head knowingly, and "reckoned" that he had a pretty good idea as to the chief of the road-agent gang, although "maybe" he couldn't prove it.

At last the crowd dispersed; but, after leaving the vicinity of the mine, neither Blair nor the Irishman was idle. They saw which way the tide was beginning to run and they did all in their power to help it, and before they retired to rest that night they held a secret confab and chuckled over the adroit way in which they were getting the inhabitants of Candle-box Camp to help them in their designs upon the mine.

The next day witnessed the funeral of the general. He was buried in a lonely little green nook on the hillside right above the mine which had been the indirect means of costing him his life.

Almost everybody in the Camp was there, and Blair volunteered to deliver, in lieu of a funeral service, a slight eulogy on the deceased, for, to the disgrace of Candle-box Camp be it said, there was neither Bible nor prayer-book in the settlement.

After the funeral was over and the assemblage had dispersed, Miss Jones took occasion when she and Desdemona got back to their own quarters to ask her friend a few questions. Light-hearted and volatile as the young lady from Angel's usually was, yet, in spite of her ways, she had a very good idea of business.

"Now, Dessy dear, you mustn't think I am a great, horrid, heartless thing if I ask you about business," she began, "but, although you

are ever-so-much smarter than I am in almost everything, yet I think I know more about mining and such things than you do."

"Yes; that is probable."

"Well, then, I want to know what are you going to do? How are you fixed, dear? Have you got much money—are you going to sell the mine or run it?"

"I don't know; I have not thought anything about it. I suppose I will have to sell the property, if I can find any one willing to buy it—that is, if it is mine to sell, for I believe there is a very heavy mortgage upon it, and perhaps I shall not be able to retain possession of it."

"Oh, yes, you will, if you want to!" Miss Jones assured, impulsively. "I know all about such things. That is just the way my pa made his big strike. He and some other men had a mine, and it wasn't paying, and it was over head and ears in debt, and the rest all got out frightened, you know, but my pa, he stuck, and the sheriff come to put him out, and pa raised a crowd, that whipped the sheriff and his men, and then they all went to law, and while they were fighting, and just as they were going to indict pa for murder or arson or something, the mine turned into a regular bonanza, and in a month he made money enough to buy a dozen judges, so he said, and that is how he made his big strike."

"But, how can I take care of the mine?"

"Mr. Talbot can, just as he did for your pa. Just you say to him, 'This mine is all I've got, and I don't want any one to take it away from me,' and I'll just bet you the best hat you ever saw that he'll hold on to it for you!"

"Indeed, I fear the mine is all I have, for, from what father said, only a day or two ago, I think all he had left in the world is locked up in this property."

"You would be a great goose, then, to give it up!" Miss Jones exclaimed, indignantly. "Why, you might strike it rich here, at any time, and then you could easily pay off any claims against the mine. Just you take my advice and stick to it. Why, Dessy, dear, if I owned this Candle-box property I'd hold onto it so tight that it would take a derrick to pull me out. See Mr. Talbot at once; tell him just how you are situated, and ask his advice."

A faint blush came up in the pale cheeks of the general's daughter.

"You seem to have a great deal of faith in Mr. Talbot," she said, quietly.

"And so have you, too—you know you have!" Miss Jones replied, promptly, and with a great deal of spirit. "He's just a perfectly splendid fellow; that's what he is! That is my opinion, and I don't care who knows it. Now, let me go after Talbot, right away, for there isn't any time to lose. I know all about these things: when a mine ain't working it's eating itself up; I have heard my pa say that, a hundred times, and what Judge Jones of Angels didn't know about mining—although he was my pa—wasn't worth knowing."

"Do as you please; I am willing," Desdemona assented. In truth, she felt that her friend had spoken correctly; Talbot was the only man in whom she could place absolute trust.

So Miss Jones summoned Talbot, and frankly explained the situation to him.

"Now, what do you advise Miss Cadwalader to do?" she asked, in conclusion.

"Hold on to the mine by all means," he replied. "If she can manage to retain possession of it for two months, I will stake my mining reputation, and I have had a good deal of experience, that it will produce ore rich enough to clear off all the liabilities against the property in a very short time."

"But can I hold it, Mr. Talbot?" Desdemona inquired. "If I understood my father aright, only a day or two ago, he told me that he was being pushed for the payment of a heavy debt, and that this property was in danger, as he could not possibly raise the money to meet the claim immediately."

"Yes, miss; I understand all about that; your father and I talked the matter over; and I say to you, as I said to him, tell me to hold the mine, and I will hold it in spite of all the creditors in the world."

"That is exactly what she does say, Mr. Talbot!" Miss Jones interposed.

"Yes," said Desdemona, thus prompted, "hold the mine if you think that I ought to hold it, and can do so honestly."

"No one has any just claim, and I laugh at legal trickery up in this region," Talbot declared. "Do not fear; you shall not be robbed of your property while I live, and, someday, when I look back over my life and see how many narrow shaves I have had, I begin to believe that my days are to be long in the land."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

MR. BLAIR DEVELOPS HIMSELF.

THE interview with the superintendent being so eminently satisfactory tended in a great measure to quiet the mind of the afflicted girl, and she retired to rest that night, feeling much

more consoled than she would have believed she could be that morning.

True, her father was gone; but to the loss of her parent was not added the grief of being cast out homeless and penniless upon the cold charities of a cruel world. She had a friend—one true, stout heart who would back her quarrel with life, if occasion called.

Her thoughts in regard to Talbot—bold Talbot of Cinnabar—began to change. At first she had been inclined to look upon him in the light of one who was something of a desperado—one who would sooner fight than eat; but now she began to comprehend that in this world a man must fit himself to the position which he must fill. The quiet, gentlemanly clerk of the East must become a bold fighting-man if he would triumph in the wild scenes of the far West.

At the present Talbot was beginning to appear very much like a hero to the eyes of the beautiful orphan.

In the morning the superintendent called all the hands of the mine together and explained to them that everything would go on exactly the same as before; Miss Cadwalader would run the mine in place of her father, and he wound up his brief speech by saying that he hoped, for the sake of the young lady, every man connected with the works would do his level best to make the thing a success.

The men emphatically replied that they would, "every time," and then they went to their work.

Blair had his spies out, and this news was speedily brought to his knowledge.

"Oho! Going to run the mine herself, is she?" he exclaimed to McCracken. "What do you think of that?"

"Faix! it's a word or two that you will have to say in the matter," the Irishman replied.

"Suppose we go down and call upon her at once?" Blair suggested. "She might as well know that we are 'going for' her, first as last."

"Yes, sur; we'll not kape her in suspenders!" observed the Pride of Siskiyou, jocosely.

So the two set off for the Candle-box mine.

Ginger was at the gate as usual, and after a brief parley he admitted the twain.

The negro was not very particular during the day, but he had made up his mind that no one upon any account should get him away from the gate at night again.

The moment darkness came on he shut the gate tightly, and then, with a rifle in his hand and a brace of revolvers belted to his waist, kept guard over the top of the wall. "Dey don't fool dis yer nigger dat way ag'in!" he had repeated, a hundred times at least.

The two conspirators found Miss Cadwalader in the house in company with Miss Jones.

Blair came at once to business, for, as he was fond of expressing it, in business he was a man of very few words.

"My dear Miss Cadwalader," he began, smoothly and softly, "I have taken this occasion to call upon you and express my sympathy for the very severe loss that you have sustained, and also to see you on a little matter of business, which I presume had better be settled up as soon as possible. I suppose you are acquainted with all your father's business affairs?"

"No, sir, not all."

"Well, of course I didn't know how that was, but I assume that you know your father's affairs are not in quite so good a shape as they might be."

"Yes, sir, I know that."

"The fact is, Miss Cadwalader, I hold a heavy claim against your father, and according to the conditions upon which the loan was made, if the money owed is not paid upon demand, I have the right to take the mine, which is pledged as security."

The girl was perplexed; Blair spoke with such absolute assurance that she didn't know but what he could take the mine in spite of her.

"I don't want to act the part of a harsh creditor, you know," he continued; "but as your father is dead, and you, being a lady, utterly unfitted for attending to any such enterprise, and in order to save the property from depreciation, and so endanger my loan, I thought that I had better act on the matter at once. I am willing to do more than the fair thing by you, considering the circumstances. Although I have already advanced more money than the mine is considered to be worth, if you are content to turn the property over to me, immediately, I will give you my check for a thousand dollars, or if you choose to accept a certain proposition which I had the honor to make to your father, a short time before his death, and which you then refused, the affair can be easily arranged."

Desdemona understood well enough to what proposition he referred, and a slight flush appeared upon her pale face.

"You see," the bonanza king said, in conclusion, "I want to do the square thing just as well as I know how."

Miss Jones saw that Desdemona was perplexed, and that she was uncertain how to reply, and in this emergency she thought of the man

who appeared to her to be a very Atlas, fit to carry the Candle-box works on his broad shoulders.

"Wait, dear," she whispered, in Desdemona's ear; "wait until I call Mr. Talbot. He knows how to talk to these men. Please wait a few minutes, gentlemen," she added, sweetly, to the two conspirators, and then she hastened away.

Miss Jones's hurried manner did not remove in the least the suspicions that her action excited in the minds of the two plotters.

"Curse that girl! she means mischief!" Blair whispered, to McCracken, and he half-turned and tried to see where the girl was going by means of the side window.

"Bad 'cess to them! ain't they all alike?" returned the Irishman, in the same cautious tone. "Didn't Mother Eve begin it, and hain't they all been at it more or less ever since?"

And both of the two saw that they had good grounds for their suspicions, when, after a very brief interval, Miss Jones reëntered the apartment, followed by Talbot.

Heartily under their breath both of the men cursed the superintendent. Talbot seemed fated to cause them trouble.

"This gentleman is going to attend to all the business of the mine in future," Miss Jones explained, introducing Talbot, "is he not, dear?" and she turned to Desdemona.

"Yes," the girl assented, feeling strong at the very sight of the cool, quiet but determined superintendent.

"So, gentlemen, if you will explain to him the business upon which you come I guess he will be able to attend to it. You know Mr. Talbot, of course."

Despite the great control that Dick had over his marble-like face, he could not quite suppress the faint smile that played about his lips as he noticed the look of disgust on Blair's countenance.

Yes, he *did* know Talbot, and there was still a mark upon the face of the bonanza king which dated from the night when he had been introduced to Talbot and to Talbot's iron-like fist.

Blair, however, speedily controlled his anger, and came at once to the point; he explained that he held a large claim for money loaned to the dead General Cadwalader, the Candle-box mine being pledged as security for the loan, and one of the conditions of the bargain was that the money was payable on demand, and that, in case it was not paid, the mine was to be forfeited.

Talbot listened quietly, and when Blair had finished, demanded:

"You hold this claim?"

"Yes."

"Do you demand your money?"

"Yes, or the mine, either; I don't care which."

"Hold on; don't be in such a hurry," Talbot returned, quietly. "We cannot pay the money at present, as we are not now prepared; it was expressly stipulated that the money should not be demanded as long as the interest was paid."

"Well, I do not know anything about that," Blair replied, impatiently. "I bought the claim just as it stands, and I hold to the letter of the bond."

"You will have to sue for it; I am advised that we have a good legal defense."

Blair stared; he was getting angry.

"Sue!" he cried; "sue be hanged! I shall not sue. It is expressly stipulated that if the money is not paid the mine is to be transferred."

"Oh, such a thing was never heard of! We refuse to do anything of the kind. Go into court and make us turn the mine over."

"That is your game, is it?" cried Blair, hotly. "Well, I shall not do anything of the kind. You cannot pay the money, and this mine is my property by right, so I give you fair warning that I am going to take possession of it."

"We will give you six feet of soil to lie in, and that is all; and even to win that you'll have to have an army at your back!" replied Talbot, coldly.

"I'll have the men fast enough, and I give you fair warning that if we win it will be six feet of rope that you will get. The Camp is getting roused against you now. This road-agent business is about played out, and, Miss Cadwalader, I want you to know that general suspicion points at this man as the murderer of your father."

Talbot breathed hard, but Desdemona was on her feet in a moment, and with a look restrained him.

"Leave this house!" she cried. "I defy you! Do your worst! You will not triumph over me if there is any justice in heaven!"

Like two whipped curs the plotters sneaked away.

that a bold game was pretty sure to win, even if the man didn't have the cards in his hand to back it up."

"Well, in this case, miss, I think we have the cards," remarked Talbot, quietly. "All the advantage is on our side. We hold the fort, a pretty strong one, too; and behind good stout walls, such as the stockade is, ten men, well-armed and resolute, could easily hold a hundred at bay."

"But the miners—the workmen, will they be willing to peril their lives in my behalf?" asked Desdemona, anxiously.

"I will answer for them, to a man!" Talbot replied. "Why, miss, it is their bread and butter; the mine gives them a living, and they are not going to stand tamely by and see this fellow seize upon the property. I really doubt if he will be able to raise a force, although I reckon he will throw out money freely, and he has managed in his cunning way to get up a sentiment against me in the town. You see, this Camp is about as wild and lawless a one as I have ever seen, and as I have beaten some of the bullies of the town pretty badly at their own game, they will not leave any stone unturned to get even with me. They know that, just so long as I remain in the Camp, they will not be able to have everything their own way, so of course they want to get rid of me as speedily as possible."

"Do you think this man will venture to attack the mine?" Desdemona asked.

"Undoubtedly, if he can raise force enough to encourage the hope that he will succeed. That is the case, just as it stands, in a nutshell. If he can raise a crowd he will surely give us battle."

"Oh, this is a terrible state of affairs!" the girl exclaimed, nervous with apprehension.

"Dessy, dear, it is nothing when you get used to it," the young lady from Angels remarked, philosophically. "Oh, I know all about it. You see, dear, it is the peculiar way they have of doing business in California. I remember that my pa, when he was alive, was always in hot water—always fighting somebody or something. You know in some of these camps they always 'have a man for breakfast,' so my pa used to say."

"It may all blow over," Talbot hastened to say, in order to relieve the mind of the young girl; not that he thought so, for he felt sure it would not. Long experience had taught him how easily a strong public sentiment could be excited against a man in a wild and lawless camp such as Candle-box truly was. Besides, an attack upon the mine was the last trump left in the hand of the bonanza king. He must either play that or throw up the game and confess himself a beaten man, which he was not at all likely to do."

"I cannot bear the thoughts of a conflict, but I presume it cannot be avoided," the girl remarked.

"Of course it cannot be avoided!" Miss Jones declared. "You must fight for what is yours, mustn't you?"

"It is no sin, you know, for a man to strike in self-defense," Talbot assumed. "We will not take any steps to invite a conflict; we will simply defend ourselves against ruffianly violence; and now, ladies, if you will excuse me, I will go out and prepare to receive this land-shark and his gang if he is mad enough to lead his crowd to attack us. We cannot play with them, you know, in such a case as this, for if the tug of war *does* come it will be either their lives or ours, and as for myself, I feel quite certain from what has already transpired, that, like the pirates of old, I fight with a rope around my neck, and I do not intend my foes shall have the tightening of it, if I can help it."

And with a pleasant smile upon his face the superintendent passed out into the open air, appearing much more like a man going to a cheerful entertainment than one who expected within an hour or so to give battle for his life.

"Isn't he just perfectly splendid!" Miss Jones exclaimed, in a tone which fully revealed her private opinion that the superintendent was much above the common run of men.

"He is a man, every inch of him!" Desdemona assented, a rich, warm color mounting into her cheeks.

"And he has found a little favor in your eyes, at last, eh?" the girl from Angels questioned, mischievously, "although at first you thought he was a great bully of a fellow—a regular desperado?"

"Am I to blame for liking the man who is willing to risk his life in my cause?" Desdemona demanded, the blush deepening in her cheek, and yet meeting her friend's laughing gaze with unabashed eyes.

"No, you wouldn't be a woman, but a marble statue if you did not like him!" Polly returned. "I wish you didn't like him, though," she continued, regretfully.

"Why so?" the other asked, in wonder.

"Because then there would be a chance for me!" Miss Jones retorted, with a comical look.

"I tell you what it is, Dessy, if you had not made up your mind to like him, I would have gone for him like a repeater, as my pa used to say!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

UNEXPECTED ALLIES.

"THAT is right!" cried Polly, exultantly, as the door closed after the discomfited suitor; "that is the way to talk. My pa always said

Leaving the two girls to their meditations, we will now follow Talbot's footsteps.

When he left the house he found all the miners congregated without, by the gate of the stockade, busy in conversation.

Blair, in his hurried retreat, had paused long enough to let fly a Parthian arrow, a poisoned shaft, indeed.

He had addressed the miners, told them that he claimed possession of the Candle-box property—that it was his, legally—that he had served due notice upon the present occupants, and that he was now on his way to the Happy Palace to get his forces together in order to take possession, peaceably if he could, but forcibly if he must. He warned the miners that he had force enough engaged to take the mine; told them that their superintendent, Talbot, was a marked man, and that the men of the Camp had determined upon making an example of him if he persisted in defying their warning and remaining in the Camp; and he furthermore said to the men that he had no quarrel at all with them, and trusted they would be wise enough to keep out of a quarrel in which they could have no possible concern. As he explained to them they could all retain their positions, Talbot would be the only man who would have to go, and he said, openly, that the superintendent was thought, by the greater part of the town, to be the leader of the road-agents, that he was the Blood-red Hand, and that his finger had fired the shot which had killed General Cadwalader; he had assassinated the old man in this cruel and barbarous manner, so that he might get easy possession of both the Candle-box property and the general's daughter.

And, after delivering himself of these dark suspicions, the bonanza king hurried away to organize his forces for the attack.

Blair had played a most excellent game, and played it in the most skillful manner; his speech gave rise to doubt and indecision.

The workmen of the mine had been strong for Talbot, but as they found that in the quarrel they were not only going to encounter Blair and his men, but that the speculator had succeeded in enlisting about all the inhabitants of the Camp on his side, they really hesitated, and began to ask themselves if they were wise in going against the will of the town.

And Talbot, when he came to converse with them, soon discovered how they felt, and fully realized how effectually the poison of Blair's words had taken effect.

Time passed rapidly, and when the sun, high up in the heavens, proclaimed that the noon hour had come, Talbot, sitting quietly by the gate, waiting with all the patience of a stoic for events to develop, caught sight of the Happy Palace girl, Molly, accompanied by the comedian, Tubbs, hurrying at the top of their speed toward the mine.

A peculiar light shone for a moment in Talbot's dark eyes.

"The girl comes to warn and assist me," he muttered. "She is true though the others fall from me. When a woman—a true woman, once gives her faith, doubt cannot shake her."

Molly was all out of breath when she came up to Talbot, and Tubbs, who was somewhat fat, was blowing like a porpoise.

"Oh, Mr. Talbot!" the girl exclaimed, as soon as she could catch her breath, "Dick, they are coming for you, tooth and nail!"

"You bet!" cried Tubbs, emphatically. "The land is burning; mercy sits on high, and either they or we must lower lie!"

"The Frisco sharp?" Talbot asked, calmly.

"Yes, and he's got the hull town at his back!"

"A mob, a rude irreverent mob," the comedian spouted, "on bloody slaughter bent!"

"But we've come to fight for you, Tubbs and I!" Molly continued, excitedly. "Tubbs is my pardner, now. I did think of another chap, but thar ain't nary use of a gal throwing her affections away on a man that hasn't any use for 'em, so I said to Tubbs, jes' you come along and fight for Talbot, and then, if we ain't killed, and you say hitch, I'm agreeable."

"For the sake of this fair maid I would face the wild Numidian lion and tear his rugged jaws asunder that he might no longer bay the moon with howling!" the man from old Arkansas declared.

"Thar they come, Dick!" Molly cried, with a glance toward the town; "get inside and shut the gate!"

"And then cry havoc and let slip the dogs of war!" Tubbs yelled, at the top of his voice.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

TALBOT RISES TO THE OCCASION.

THE girl's eyes had not deceived her. Blair, followed by some twenty-five or thirty men in warlike array, came rapidly on toward the mine.

There was no doubt whatever that this armed force was on mischief bent.

"You go inside, Molly," Talbot said, after taking a good look at the advancing host; "you and your friend go inside, and get all you can of the boys to man the wall."

The miners were all clustered in the gateway looking out, and to them Talbot turned!

"This is all my funeral, gentlemen," he said,

in his quiet, impassive way, "and I don't ask a single one of you to lift a finger in my behalf, and yet, at the same time, I don't want to be delivered up helpless into the hands of my enemies. All I want of you is to line the wall there, as though you were ready for a fight; that will give me a chance to make terms for myself, and they won't know that I am almost alone and helpless. That's fair, boys, isn't it? You can do this much for me even if I am the black-hearted villain that they say, can't you?"

The men nodded assent; it wasn't in human nature to refuse such a simple request from a man brought to bay and actually hunted down by his enemies.

The favor was a trifling one, and the miners made up their minds that they would grant it; so they appeared in warlike array above the wall.

Molly and Tubbs were in their midst, and the girl, who had got an idea from Talbot's speech that the men were not hungering for a fight in his behalf, could not restrain her indignation.

"If you don't stick to him to the last breath you are all a set of pesky cowards!" she cried, fiercely; "but Tubbs and I will, whether the rest of you do or not; we will stick to him to the death, eh, Tubbs?"

"You bet!" cried the comedian, who, spurred on by the girl, had become really valiant. "We'll go for 'em hot and heavy, and then, divine mistress of the Happy Palace, 'glorious serpent of the Nile, light the way of Stygian horrors with the splendor of thy smile!'"

The near approach of the attacking force prevented further conversation.

Noticing the hostile appearance of the miners, Blair prudently halted his force, at a safe distance, and taking his handkerchief from his pocket advanced himself, waving it as a flag of truce.

Talbot rose to meet him.

"I do not want to have anything to say to you, sir," the bonanza king remarked, stiffly, "but I do want to speak to these misguided men," and he pointed to the miners whose heads and shoulders just appeared above the top of the stockade; "to these misguided men," he repeated, in a loud voice, "who are foolish enough to take up arms and show fight on behalf of a red-handed murderer!"

"Who is a red-handed murderer?" Molly demanded, in a terrible rage, a cocked navy revolver clutched firmly in her right hand.

"This man, Talbot!" Blair replied, insolently.

"Take it back!" cried the girl, leveling the revolver full at Blair, "take it back instantly or I'll drive a bullet through you!"

The expression upon the face of the bonanza king changed, and his breath came thick and hard, for he comprehended that the girl was wild enough to do anything.

"Hold on!" cried Tubbs, excitedly, "hold, by all the gods, I charge thee! hold thy desperate hand! 'Tis against all the rules of war to fire upon a flag of truce!"

"Don't fire, and let me speak!" Talbot remarked, calmly, even now in the face of all this cruel danger the coolest man on the ground.

"You and the citizens of this Camp bring an accusation against me," he continued, raising his voice so that all should catch his words. "Am I to be condemned unheard? am I to have no chance for my life?"

"Why, yes, certainly," responded Blair; "we will give you a fair trial."

"A fair trial!" Talbot repeated, "and what sort of a fair trial do you mean? A trial such as I would have down in Frisco or in the Eastern cities, or a trial after the fashion common in the mining region?"

"Why, the last, of course."

"That suits me exactly!" Talbot cried, for the first time a trace of excitement appearing in his voice. "That is what I want, and so I demand, after the fashion of the mines, a trial by battle. I am here, armed and ready; let my accusers step forth; I care not how many there be of them, one, two, ten or twenty, if I am so dangerous that it requires an army to beat me, and you are cowardly enough to avail yourself of the opportunity."

There was a dead silence for a few moments after this ringing speech; the listeners were astounded.

This was the way in which Talbot of Cinnabar showed the white feather.

It was a fair proposal, and Blair felt that he was caught. He looked back at the rest to see what they thought about it.

Old Judge Gobble nodded his head, gravely. "This seems to me to be about the squar' thing. I've bin 'lected Judge Lynch," he remarked, slowly, "an' I s'pose that in this hyer case it is my say-so."

"Yis, sur; 'straddle the blind,' an' go in," McCracken exclaimed.

"I'm very much obleeged to yer," the judge retorted, savagely, "but I reckon that it ain't any of my funeral. I ain't accusin' the man of nothin'; I'm jes' judgin' the case, that's all; but, what I've got to say on this hyer p'int is, that if a man sets up to make his word good with his body, then it's time the accusers of that air man come forward and face the music, likewise."

"Unless they are afraid to back up their words," said Talbot, with cutting emphasis.

The remark stung Blair at once.

"I'm not afraid to back my word with my body!" he exclaimed, angrily, for, in truth, he was annoyed that he had been caught in the trap and forced to toe the mark.

"Neither am I afraid!" cried Klamath John, stepping forward. "I say that this man, who calls himself Talbot of Cinnabar, is a black-hearted, red handed scoundrel, who has been driven out of nearly every decent mining-camp in California."

"Two!" said Dick, as cool as a cucumber. "Come! ar'n't there two or three more of you? Let us have enough to make the thing interesting, you know. Now is the chance to settle old scores and end the matter. Let every man in this Camp who bears a grudge against me, or wants me run out, step forward, now. Don't any one hold back! You'll never get a better chance at me."

Kanaka Bill and Jockey Joe stepped forward and joined Klamath John.

"I had my eyes on you two!" Talbot exclaimed. "I knew you were hungering to get at me, and there's a big friend of mine, yonder, that I had a slight discussion with the other night," and with his outstretched finger, Dick indicated the giant who had attempted to extinguish the light of the Arkansas comedian's genius, with a big potato, on the night of the exhibition.

"No, sir-ee—hoss-fly!" responded that worthy, instantly. "I got all I wanted of you, the other night. Thar's sich a thing as gettin' too much pork for a shillin'. You kin count me out, ef you will be so kind, stranger!"

"You are a man!" cried Molly, at the top of her lungs; "you are a man, and you ought to come out of that crowd of cowards!"

The crowd didn't relish this pointed allusion, at all, and the miners looked at each other, doubtfully and inquiringly, as much as to ask if the girl had rightly named them.

"Four—is that all?" Dick inquired.

No one else stirred.

"Talbot, I reckon that you see the heft of the job!" the old judge remarked. "Now, gents, if you are ready, I'll give the word. You are all armed, and I reckon this hyer thing is to the death, isn't it?"

"As far as I am concerned it is!" Talbot cried, instantly. "I won't run or cry for quarter until I am killed, and then I can't."

"To the death!" Klamath John exclaimed.

"Hold on, then, till we scatter!" the judge cried. "I reckon that you'll make meat for five funerals afore you git through, and thar ain't any one of this crowd anxious to make the sixth, as far as I know. Git, boys!"

The crowd obeyed on the word; the five desperate men alone remained.

"One, two, three—sail in your elephants!" Judge Gobble shouted.

The sharp crack of the revolvers instantly sounded on the air.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE END OF THE FIGHT.

THE foemen were at it instantly, the moment the word was given.

Four against one!

The odds seemed terrible, and yet, when Talbot was compared to his antagonists, it was not so great, after all. He was an old and practiced duelist; as good a revolver-shot, too, as this world had ever seen; and he entered upon this affair as coolly and as unconcerned as though it was a simple trial of skill instead of a desperate battle for life.

Eight shots were fired in as many minutes. Four by the attacking force and four by the resolute man who was confronting his foes as gamely as the mountain bear brought to bay.

Talbot had a revolver in each hand, and so quick and skillful was he in the use of the weapon that he found it an easy matter to fire two shots to the one of any single enemy.

Eight bullets whistling through the air, and six of the eight reached the mark, two only being wasted.

Out of the four shots that the attacking party fired, two of them drew blood from Talbot. Klamath John's bullet creased his cheek, leaving a mark as though he had been cut with a whip-lash—a narrow shave, for an inch more to the right would have rendered it a dangerous wound. Kanaka Bill's leaden pill tore a way through the fleshy part of Dick's arm; the ruffian had aimed at the heart and had not been very wide of the mark. Blair, through sheer nervousness, and Jockey Joe, for want of skill, had missed outright.

But Talbot's metal messengers, on the contrary, had sped with wonderful directness straight each one to its target.

Blair went down, with a bullet in the shoulder—an ugly, dangerous wound, but not absolutely a mortal one; but the leaden angels of blood and slaughter settled Kanaka Bill and Jockey Joe's account with this world forever. Bill was hit directly in the center of the forehead and Joe right in the heart. Both dropped dead in their tracks, with scarcely a groan.

And Klamath John, the giant hunter, too,

was down—shot through the lungs, mortally wounded, apparently, for the crimson life-stream came gushing from his lips and he writhed like a wounded snake in agony.

But the fight was not yet ended, for Blair, reclining upon his side, took deliberate aim at Talbot and pulled the trigger of his revolver a second time.

And the aim was a true one, too, now, and no doubt the shot would then and there have ended the eventful career of Talbot of Cinnabar, but the pistol missed fire; these little accidents will happen sometimes with the best of tools.

Talbot had approached quite near; the foe-men had all advanced when the battle began, all acting under the belief that a moving man could not be hit quite so easily as a stationary one.

And now came the chance of the victor, and he was so near that the bonanza king could detect a fierce glitter in his eyes as Talbot leveled his revolver directly at him.

Blair felt that his last hour had come; he was certain that his life was not worth a moment's purchase if Talbot's finger ever pulled the trigger of the pistol.

Life was sweet, sweeter even than the reputation of being game to the core and of dying like a man with a good backbone.

"Hold on!" he exclaimed, throwing away his revolver; "don't fire! I give it up—I've got enough!"

A bitter smile came over the bronzed face of the victor.

"I reckon that it is my say-so now!" he replied. "You would have peppered me if your pistol hadn't missed fire; besides, you seem to forget the conditions of this fight. It was to be to the death. You had no business to throw away your revolver. I won't take any advantage of you, though. Pick up your revolver and I won't fire until you are ready for a shot!"

But the bonanza king had no stomach for any more fighting. He had "weakened" most decidedly.

"No, no, I am wounded and disabled," he protested; "I will not fight any more, and if you attack me it will be murder!"

"I appeal to the crowd!" Talbot replied. "It was to be a fight to the death. Although you are disabled you tried to get another shot at me, and if your revolver hadn't missed fire you would have sent me to the happy hunting-grounds."

"But I will do the fair thing!" Blair exclaimed, in mortal terror. "I'll own up beat, and agree never to trouble you any more. I swear to you by all that is holy that I will not bear any malice. I will do anything in reason—I'll give you time to make payment on my claim on the mine."

"Aha! now you are talking!" Talbot cried, with a polite bow. "That is business, every time. Give me a year to meet your demand and I will call the matter square!"

"It's a bargain!" the bonanza king instantly replied, a cold perspiration oozing out from every pore, now that escape seemed probable, for never in all his life had Randolph Blair come so near to death.

"All of you will bear witness to this!" Talbot said, appealing to the crowd. "The proposition comes from him, and on behalf of Miss Cadwalader I accept the offer."

"Oh, it's all square!" Judge Gobble remarked. "The game is yours, and if he chooses to settle in this way it is nobody else's business."

"I will act square, upon my life I will!" the bonanza king protested. "I will make out the papers just as soon as I can. I give you my word that I won't try any gum-game."

"You would not be wise to try any," Talbot remarked, quietly, but with a peculiar grimness perceptible in his voice, "because if you didn't act square, and should try to take advantage of my mercy, I would kill you as certainly as I spare you to-day, no matter where you went, for, in such a case, I would follow you to the very end of the world."

Blair shuddered; there was not the least doubt in his mind that this bold man of the mountains—this cool and dauntless Talbot of Cinnabar—would be as good as his word.

"Gentlemen, I suppose that this circus may be considered as over," Talbot remarked, addressing the crowd. "How is it, judge? I have maintained my cause at the revolver's muzzle. What is the verdict, guilty or not guilty?"

"Not guilty, squire!" old Gobble replied, instantly. "I reckon that all the Camp will allow you have flayed your accusers in the most genteel and handsum manner. These three, hyer, ain't likely to say anything, an' I reckon that this hyer gent is satisfied," and he nodded toward Blair, who was sitting up endeavoring to stanch the flow of blood from his wound, with his handkerchief.

"I haven't got a word to say against him," Blair answered, morosely. "I am satisfied to call it quits, and if I don't get out of this region as soon as I am able, then I will make you a present of my head for a football."

Talbot then directed the attention of the miners to the other three.

"Are they dead?" he asked.

An examination was at once made by some members of the crowd, while others assisted Blair to his feet, at the suggestion of his familiar, the Irishman.

Bill and Joe had been killed instantly, but the grim and silent hunter, Klamath John, still breathed, although it was evident that life was going fast.

"Open his shirt, and let us see if we cannot stop the flow of blood," Dick now interposed, which one of the miners proceeded to do; and as he opened the flannel shirt which covered the brawny chest of the hunter, a folded paper was exposed to view.

The miner seized this, astonished at finding such a thing there, and curious in regard to the contents, while the bystanders gaped on in amazement.

A surprise awaited them that they little dreamed of, for, as the man unfolded the paper, the lurid sign of the road-agents, the Blood-red Hand, was displayed to view.

The paper was a warning address to the miners employed on the Candle-box property, commanding them to quit the mine within three days, or else prepare to die.

The mystery of the Blood-red Hand was now a mystery no longer. It was clear that the chief of the gang lay gasping in the agonies of death before them, and as the two others who had fallen, Kanaka Bill and Jockey Joe, had always been his boon companions, it was pretty certain that they were the other two road-agents, for it was remembered that there had always been three in the gang.

Talbot's innocence was thus made apparent.

And now that the truth was known, the miners remembered that Klamath John had been connected with the Candle-box mine, and it was clear to all that he had been the secret plotter, who, not possessing money enough to ever enable him to get hold of the property, which experience had taught him to believe was very valuable, had adopted this peculiar mode of secret terrorism, hoping thereby some day to secure the property at his own figures.

The end had come now, though, and Talbot's bullet had forever destroyed all chance of the giant hunter getting possession of the lode.

And while the crowd stood and gazed at the stricken man, in wondering tones conversing concerning the strange affair, with a final gasp the soul of the outlaw took its flight.

Klamath John was dead.

Then, at Judge Gobble's suggestion, the miners proceeded to search the cabin of the hunter, and there concealed they found the blue suits which the road-agents had worn as a disguise, and also various pieces of plunder, which left no doubt that Talbot's bullets had saved the hangman a job.

Public sentiment now took a most decided change, and Candle-box Camp hailed Talbot as the hero of the hour.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

TALBOT'S REWARD.

THE bonanza king in this instance proved to be as good as his word. He executed the papers allowing a year for the payment of the money which had been advanced, and then, accompanied by his satellite, the pride of Siskiyou, the bould McCracken, shook the dust of Candle-box Camp from his feet and departed, to seek fresh fields and pastures new.

The leading men of the Camp, when they learned of his intention, endeavored to persuade him to remain.

But, once caught twice shy, says the old adage, and the speculator had got all he wanted of the Camp of Candle-box and the valley of the Klamath.

"No, sir-ee!" he cried, decidedly, to Judge Gobble, as McCracken assisted him into the coach, for he insisted upon going away at once, although his wound was an extremely painful one and common prudence would have told him that he had better remain for a few days in quiet, and give it a chance to heal, "not any more for me, judge!" he said, in the most emphatic manner; "I have got all I want and if you ever catch me outside of a sheriff's domains again I will give you leave to shoot me on sight!"

"Well, good-by; sorry that we cannot persuade you to invest in our growing town!" the judge responded; "but I presume, Mr. McCracken, that we shall see you ag'in?"

"No, sur!" returned the Irishman, indignantly. "I wouldn't be found dead in your Camp, bad 'cess to it!"

The stage rolled off, and the town of Candle-box never saw either of the two again.

Talbot carried the documents to Miss Cadwalader. He found the two girls together as usual.

"There, Miss Desdemona, for a year you will not have any reason to trouble yourself about this claim," he said, as he handed the papers to her, "and from the prospect ahead I am about as certain as a man can be that you will be able to pay it in full inside of six months."

Tears stood in the lustrous eyes of the girl and she was so much under the influence of emotion that she found it impossible to speak.

The young lady from Angels, who had all a

woman's wits where matters of the heart were concerned, noticing the peculiar looks of the two, began suddenly to have an idea that they would get on better if she wasn't there; so she immediately executed a most skillful retreat.

"Oh, Mr. Talbot, you are a perfectly splendid man!" she exclaimed, "and if I wasn't half-promised to three or four young men down at Angels, I should be strongly tempted to set my cap for you, although, maybe, it would make somebody angry that I know of!" This, with a glance at her friend that called the vivid crimson blush up into Desdemona's pale cheeks. "Excuse me for a moment; I'll be right back!" Then she caught up her hat and fled. "If she doesn't find her tongue now, he will," she muttered to herself, as she passed through the door, "or else he isn't the kind of man that I think he is."

Left alone with Talbot, Desdemona felt that she must speak. The foolish pride of power and place were all gone now. In the beginning, she had thought herself far better than this man. Her station in life was so far above his that any love between them was impossible; she cried out to herself that he was a lawless desperado, and so fought vigorously against the love which was gradually stealing into her heart.

And the man loved her, too; she knew it, for there is a subtle instinct in the heart of woman-kind in such matters, although never by word or action had he given evidence of the passion which she felt sure dwelt within his heart; he had always treated her with the greatest respect and consideration.

But now she felt that the time had come for an explanation; she was all alone in the world—no one in this life to whom she could look for protection, advice and assistance, but the faithful, true-hearted man who had risked life, and all, in her battle. Instinct told her that if she afforded him a chance he would speak.

"Mr. Talbot, I am utterly at a loss to know how I can ever repay the kindness which I have received at your hands," she began, timidly. "I am a beggar, I fear, even in thanks."

"Miss Cadwalader, in all my life I have always spoken frankly both to friend and foe," he replied; "and now to you, whose good opinion I value more than words can express, I shall speak my thoughts freely. When I first saw you in Yreka your beautiful face impressed me at once, and I said to myself here is a woman who is worth a whole lifetime of toil to win. I have led a wild and adventuring life, have loved and lost, for fate seems to take a malicious pleasure in snatching from my arms every loved one who trusted herself to me. I thought that my heart was seared, and that I should never care to look with eyes of love upon any woman's face again. Your appearance showed me instantly that the idea was false; such a woman as you are I felt that I could love—love as I believe I have never loved before. I was willing to serve for you, even as the Jewish lover served seven years for the maid whom he adored. I made it my business to find out what brought you and your father up in this region, and when I heard the story of the general's mining speculation, I saw at once how unfitted he was to cope with the rude and unscrupulous men whom he was sure to come in contact with in this Camp, and I made up my mind that I, too, would come to Candle-box Camp. I was not sure that any offer of advice or assistance from me would be accepted, and so I had recourse to stratagem. I heard the story of how the Candle-box lode was originally discovered; so I assumed the character of a Digger Indian, and offered my services as a guide to your father, but after our arrival here, fortune gave me the chance I sought, and in my own proper person I entered your father's service; the rest you know; and now, Desdemona, that you know the truth, my fate is in your hands. I do not ask my answer at this time; let me prove to you that I am worthy of such a woman as you are; let me clear this mine from the load of debt which weighs it down; let me put you in a position so that you will be independent of all the world, and then, if you think—if your heart tells you that I am worthy of the reward I seek, give it to me—your own precious self."

"My heart speaks now!" Desdemona exclaimed, smiling through the tears which had dimmed her glorious eyes, and she extended both her hands to him; "love has conquered pride, and I am free to own you for my lord and master."

Our story is told, and once again cool, daring, lion-hearted Dick Talbot found a heart that could appreciate his worth.

Securely anchored in the haven of joy we leave him, but for how long we know not, for clouds will gather in the mountain region, storms will burst, and rude, lawless men seek to win golden gains by other means than by honest toil, unless restrained by the law's strong arm; but law's machinery exists not in the "pocket" by the Klamath's stream known as Candle-box Camp, and yet, if troublous times do come, what better security could the Candle-box lode have than the dauntless courage and the good right arm of bold Dick Talbot—Talbot of Cinnabar?

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